

A romantic couple embracing in a field at sunset. The man is on the left, wearing a grey sweater, and the woman is on the right, wearing a grey top. They are looking at each other and holding hands. The background is a soft, hazy sunset over a field.

*a better*

MAN

THE HEARTBREAK BROTHERS

*book three*

CARRIE ELKS

# A BETTER MAN

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## CHAPTER ONE



Courtney Roberts was late. And dirty. Neither of which was a good thing. Her cheeks were smeared with dust from the chicken coop, thanks to a half hour battle with Hester, the feistiest of her hens. Grabbing a clean tissue from her purse, she leaned forward in the car seat, angling the mirror to see the damage.

Was that poop in her hair? Ugh. There was no other option but an old spit-n-clean the way her granny used to do. Holding out a tissue and saying ‘spit’ as though it made it any better to have your face cleaned by your own saliva.

A knock on the window caused her to look up from her poor attempts to look like a normal thirty-one-year-old. Seeing the familiar smiling face, she rolled down the window, a sheepish expression molding her features.

“What are you doing?” her best friend Lainey asked. “Oh jeez, what’s that on your face?” She wrinkled her nose.

“I had a battle with Hester.” Courtney crumpled the tissue in her palm.

“Looks like she came out on top. Now come in and I’ll get you cleaned up. There’s no point in doing it yourself. It’s like mopping the floors before a cleaner comes. Just leave it to the professionals.”

Courtney grinned and climbed out of her car, following Lainey into the *I Can Make You Beautiful* salon, the strong smell of hairspray and polish remover wafting over her. It was sparkling clean in here, the way it always had been since



Lainey opened the beauty salon. Courtney could remember the two of them giggling over possible names for the place, ruling out *Curl Up And Dye* along with *Julius Scissors*.

Was that really only a few years ago? It felt like a lifetime had passed. A different life. Courtney smiled and waved at the stylists standing behind their clients, and tried to ignore the way they were all giving her curious looks.

Maybe she could pretend it was due to her dirty face. But that wasn't true. They were interested because she so rarely came into town. This was the second time in the last year that Lainey had persuaded her to actually sit in one of the cream padded seats and let her tame Courtney's wild curls. She usually wore them up – a must when you spent your day knee deep in muck, trying to scrape a living from your small farm.

“Sit down and I'll grab a cape,” Lainey told her. “Then we can talk through a game plan. I'm thinking hair, nails, and a facial. Does that work?”

Courtney glanced at her watch. It was past two p.m. “I don't know if I have time. I promised Mary and Ellis I'd join them for dinner.”

“What time do you need to be there?” Lainey asked.

“Five.”

Lainey nodded, her expression serious. “We can do this. I'll ask Nicole to do your manicure while Rhian does your facial. And I'll attack the hair.” She pulled out a piece of hay, holding it up to the mirror with a deadpan expression. “You really should come here more than once a year.”

“I've been busy,” Courtney reminded her.

“I know.” Lainey's expression softened as their eyes met again. They'd been friends for years. Ever since Courtney had arrived in town, a brand new ring on her wedding finger along with her new role as a farmer's wife.

*Another life.* She sighed, looking down at her now-bare finger. It had taken her a year to take the ring off. It still felt wrong. Shaun was dead, but he was still her husband. She'd

cried like crazy the day she finally put the slim diamond ring in the red velvet box beside her dresser.

“I think we’ll need to take a couple of inches off,” Lainey said, pulling the band from Courtney’s hair and letting her dark curls tumble over her shoulders. “Get rid of the split ends, give it some shape again. Did you even use that deep conditioner I gave you?”

“Yes.” Courtney bit down a smile at Lainey’s incredulous expression. “Okay, so I used it once.”

“Honey, you have to deep condition. You wouldn’t let the chickens go without water, so why do you starve your curls of moisture?”

Courtney scrunched her nose up. “I don’t have time to sit with that stuff in my hair for an hour. I’m lucky if I get to stand in the shower for five minutes.”

“I can tell that.” Lainey passed Courtney a pack of face wipes. “Now girl, clean your pretty face. We’ve got work to do here.”

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TWO AND A HALF HOURS LATER, Courtney emerged from the salon blinking at the still-bright sun, as Lainey held the door. Courtney’s hair was gleaming, the curls framing her face in a way that she knew would only last until tomorrow morning when she’d have to tie them back and clean out the chicken coop. Her fingers actually looked feminine for once. Her normally-ragged nails were perfectly almond shaped, coated with a pale pink polish that she promised Lainey she’d try to keep as long as possible.

“Wear gloves,” Lainey told her. “At all times. That’s an order not a request.”

And of course her friend had refused any payment from Courtney. “Think of it as an early birthday gift,” Lainey said.

“It’s not my birthday until next January,” Courtney pointed out.

Lainey had grinned. “I meant *my* birthday. That’s next month. And I want to see my best friend look pretty for it.”

“I can’t guarantee I’ll still look like this next month.” Courtney grimaced. “The chickens might have something to say about that.”

“That’s why I’ve booked you for an appointment in four weeks.” Lainey passed her a gold embossed appointment card. Courtney turned it over. Sure enough, there was an appointment already made. “And don’t try to get out of it,” Lainey warned. “I’ll hunt you down. You know I will.”

“Thank you.” Courtney hugged her. “I appreciate it.” And she’d be sure to put a tray of eggs outside Lainey’s front door tomorrow. It wasn’t anywhere near enough, but that’s how they did things in their small town of Hartson’s Creek. A neighbor made you a cake, you helped them repair their roof. The barter system was still alive and well in this little part of Virginia.

That was one of the things Courtney loved about living here.

“You’re beautiful, you know that?” Lainey asked her. “Like, model beautiful.” She sighed. “Have you thought about dating again?”

“You waited three hours to ask.” Courtney nudged Lainey with her shoulder. “I think that’s a record. And no, I haven’t thought about dating again. But I promise to tell you when I have.” It wasn’t a lie. Although, not quite the truth either.

Lainey said something under her breath, but Courtney didn’t hear it over the blood rushing through her ears. Because *he* was there. Walking across the square with two men – his brothers? He’d told her he had three of them, she remembered that much. Her breath caught in her throat as she took him in. Dark tailored pants perfectly molded to his strong, muscled thighs. A white shirt rolled at the sleeves and unbuttoned at the neck. And mirrored aviators that covered eyes she knew were hazel with flecks of blue and green. Eyes that felt like he could see right through her.

Eyes that made her feel things she hadn't felt in years.

As if he could feel the heat of her stare, the man slowly turned his head, and even with those sunglasses on she knew he was looking at her. She had to remind herself to breathe, because her lungs felt like they were on fire. He slowly lifted his sunglasses from his face, and his gaze met hers.

Suddenly, her legs felt boneless.

“Honey, are you okay?” Lainey asked.

Courtney let out a slow breath. “Yeah,” she said, her voice tight. “I’m fine.”

Lainey glanced over to the square, her eyes widening as she took the three men in. “Ah, the Heartbreak Brothers. I swear they get sexier every time I see them. Can you believe Gray Hartson lives in our little town? He’s like a superstar.” Lainey lowered her voice. “Though you probably should stop staring. It’s kinda embarrassing.”

It wasn't Gray Hartson that Courtney was looking at, though she didn't bother to correct her best friend. It was only natural that Lainey would think she was staring at the rock star.

But it was his brother, Logan, who took Courtney's breath away. The man on Gray's left who was the same height, but with a broader build, and thick muscled arms that could pin a woman to the wall with ease.

Don't ask her how she knew.

Reluctantly, Courtney pulled her gaze away. There was only so long they could stare at each other before people got to talking. And she'd had enough of that in the last two years. Kind words, sympathetic glances, worried discussions behind her back. She'd been called *Poor Courtney* so many times she wondered if it was her new name.

“I need to go,” Courtney said quickly. “I’m late for Mary and Ellis.” Her in-laws. Or ex-in-laws. What were they after your husband – their son – died? She had no idea. All she knew was that they were reality, along with the chickens, the dirt, and the curls she always had to wear in a hairband.

As for Logan Hartson, he was a fantasy. A brief dip into something she should never have touched.

And if she could still feel him staring at her as she climbed into her old F150 and pull the door behind her? Well, that was fine. She could live with the way he made her skin tingle.

---

LOGAN HARTSON STARED at Courtney Roberts, his eyes dark as they met hers. Everything about her affected him. Even from ten yards away, while walking with his brothers across the square of the town he grew up in, he was so damn aware of her it made his muscles tight and his skin heat up. He swallowed hard, his eyes still on her as she climbed into her huge truck and slammed the door shut. The only thing he could see was that mass of curls through the narrow window at the back of the cab.

“Dammit, Logan, are you listening to me?”

He reluctantly pulled his gaze away, though he still listened to the roar of the old engine as she started it up. The smell of gasoline filled the air, mixing with the scent of the flowers lining the beds around the square. That truck was ridiculous. Old, rusty, and so big it dwarfed all the cars around it. Yet somehow it made her more attractive.

“What?” he asked, looking at his oldest, and most famous brother, Gray. A rock star who’d taken the world by storm, Gray had moved back to Hartson’s Creek a couple of years ago, after falling for a waitress in the local diner. Now the two of them were up to their knees in diapers and toddler toys, thanks to Maddie having given birth to twins the previous year. They were the reason Logan was here – to celebrate their first birthday.

“I asked how the restaurant refit was going.” Gray’s voice was full of amusement. “You were somewhere else for a minute.”

Taking a deep breath, Logan brought his attention back to his brother. Even with his gaze firmly averted from the truck,

he could still hear the rumble of the engine as it pulled away. He gritted his teeth to keep himself from turning to watch her leave the town square.

He lifted his hand, raking it through his stylishly trimmed dark hair. He'd always prided himself on his appearance. Today he was wearing dress pants and a shirt – his tie rolled up and stuffed in his pocket – thanks to the early morning business meeting he'd had before leaving Boston for his home town.

He'd been living in Boston for years. Ever since he'd graduated and started working in the restaurant business. He'd slowly worked his way up through management, before striking out on his own. Now he owned three – make that almost four – restaurants across the city, all of which were highly rated by critics, thanks to his attention to detail.

“It's going slowly,” Logan told him, wincing at the memory of his meeting this morning. “We've had a few snafus, and a couple of arguments over the building regulations, but we'll get there. Paris is going in this weekend to make sure we're on track.” Paris Northman was his business partner. She had been for the last five years. Initially, she'd brought the money while he brought the drive and expertise. But after all this time, they were on a level playing field. Both of them lived for their careers, spending stupid hours at their restaurants, and their free time scouting for new locations.

“Ah, the lovely Paris.” Gray winked at him. “How is she?”

“She's hot,” Tanner agreed. “You tapping that, bro?”

Logan screwed up his nose. “No. We're in business together.” And anyway, he hadn't touched any woman for months. Not since he was last in Hartson's Creek. Hadn't had the inclination to, not even when one of his old friends-with-benefits had called him looking for an evening of fun.

He blamed the new restaurant. It was taking all his energy and concentration, leaving no time for things like sex. He was too busy to think about women.

*Yeah, you carry on believing that. So why do you have a hard-on just from looking at Courtney Roberts?*

“Are we gonna stand around here and gossip all day, or are we gonna go into the bar?” Logan asked them. He already knew his twin – the fourth of the Hartson brothers – was waiting inside for them. Though Cam also lived in Boston, he’d taken a later flight in and headed straight for the Moonlight Bar on the edge of the town square. No doubt wearing a cap down low on his face to hide his identity.

Like Gray, Cam was famous, though for a completely different reason. He played defense for the Boston Bobcats, the town’s NFL team, and was beloved by their legion of fans. Here in Virginia, he was still a familiar face. Logan thanked god that his twin wore his hair longer than he did. It meant that he didn’t have to explain to everybody he met that he wasn’t Cam Hartson.

Though enough people still made that mistake.

“Yeah, let’s hurry up and get a drink,” Tanner agreed. “I have a hot date with my wife tonight.” Tanner and Van – his childhood best friend – had reconnected last year, after a decade of not talking to each other. They ran the local drive-in movie theater, and were disgustingly in love.

“Young love.” Logan grinned. “Give it a year and you two’ll be desperate for a night apart.”

“I doubt it.” Tanner shrugged. “You’ll understand when you meet the right woman.”

Gray laughed loudly. “Logan’s married to his restaurants. We all know that.”

“Yeah,” Tanner agreed as they walked into the bar. “But do they keep him warm at night?”

Logan shook his head, sighing at his brothers’ teasing. “Why don’t you ask Cam when he’s going to settle down?” he asked, as he spotted his twin sitting at the bar. Cam stood up from the stool he was sitting on, a huge grin on his face as he walked over to hug his brothers one by one.

“Why are you talking about me settling down?” Cam asked, looking genuinely confused. As expected, he had his Boston Bobcats hat pulled low on his head. He was wearing a pair of low-slung jeans and a black t-shirt. The days of Logan and Cam dressing identically were long-gone, thank God. Logan winced at the thought of it.

They may have looked the same, but they were individuals.

“Tanner was asking Logan when he was gonna find a woman,” Gray said, slapping Cam on the back. “But we don’t need to ask you. We know you’re never going to settle down.”

“I don’t have time.” Cam shrugged. “And even if I did, I wouldn’t tell you guys.”

Tanner punched Cam in the arm. “You’re a professional football player. We all know you’re fighting the women off.”

Cam shook his head at his brothers, while Logan bit down a grin. Though he’d flown back to his home town a few times recently, it wasn’t often that all four of the brothers were here at the same time. The last occasion had been for Tanner and Van’s wedding.

And now they were all here for his nephews’ first birthday party. Gray and Maddie’s twin sons had come as a surprise to them as well as everybody else. Cam had been miffed that there were more twins in the family, whereas Logan thought it was hilarious.

“I’ll get the first round. What are you having?” Cam asked them.

“I’ll take a beer,” Gray said.

“I’ll have the same,” Tanner added.

“Just water for me,” Logan told them.

Three heads immediately turned to look at him. “What?” He shrugged. “I gotta drive tonight.”

Cam eyed him suspiciously. “Where are you going?”



Logan leaned his elbows on the bar. “Catching up with a friend.”

“So you’re leaving me on my own?” Cam put his hand against his heart and winced. “How could you?”

Logan laughed. “We’re not kids anymore. And you can spend the night with Aunt Gina. She’d love that.”

“So this friend. Are they of the male or female variety?” Cam asked, still side-eyeing Logan.

“None of your business.”

Cam shrugged. “Female then. A booty call?”

“I’ll refer you to my previous answer,” Logan told him, taking the glass of water Gray was holding.

“Can you two stop bitching for a minute?” Gray asked. “I want to make a toast and you’re spoiling it.”

Cam held his hands up. “Go ahead.”

Gray lifted his bottle of beer, a smile curling his lips. “To my brothers. For always being here even when life is crazy and time is expensive. Thank you for making time for my family.”

“To family,” Tanner said, lifting his own bottle up.

“And to Becca, because she’ll kill us if we don’t include her,” Cam added, referring to their baby sister.

“To family,” Logan murmured before he took a sip of cool water. He loved his brothers like crazy, with their constant jibes and fierce affection.

But that wasn’t the real reason he was here today. The real reason was driving out of town, in a truck that made her look even tinier than she already was.

And tonight, he intended to make her his.

Again.

## CHAPTER TWO



“Ellis, can you pass the mashed potatoes to Courtney.” Mary Roberts, Courtney’s mother-in-law, gave her a soft smile. Mary always served too much food. As if she still hadn’t gotten used to the fact that her two sons had long since moved out of the house. The Roberts always ate family style, the food piled in the middle of the table. Today there was a pot roast, along with potatoes, corn bread, carrots, and string beans, along with a huge jug of gravy that her father-in-law, Ellis, was currently slathering over his plate.

“I’m fine.” Courtney rubbed her stomach and shot her mother-in-law a smile. “I haven’t eaten this well in a long time.”

“Since last Friday when you were over.” Ellis winked at her.

“I’m late,” a deep voice boomed out as the backdoor opened. Courtney had her back to it. She was sitting in the same chair as always. It had been hers since Shaun brought her home eight years earlier. And next to her was his empty chair. Nobody ever sat in it, not even on the rare occasion when they had a full table. It was just there, a constant reminder of his absence.

“Carl, come and sit down.” Mary patted the empty chair next to hers. Courtney forced a smile on her face and turned her head to greet her brother-in-law. He was Shaun’s older brother. At thirty-eight, his hair held the promise of grey, and the skin at the corner of his eyes crinkled in a way that Shaun’s

never would. He was wearing his police uniform – he must have come straight from a shift.

“You look different,” Carl murmured, leaning down to kiss Courtney’s cheek. She could feel the heat of his breath on her skin, and she had to force herself not to flinch.

“She’s been to the salon,” Mary said, already filling a plate full of food for him. “Doesn’t she look pretty?”

Carl nodded. “Yeah, she does.” He slid into the seat opposite Courtney’s and filled his glass with milk. “You going out tonight or something?”

Courtney shook her head. “Lainey asked me to come in for her to experiment on. Her treat.”

“You *should* go out, looking like that.” Carl tipped his head to the side. “I could take you somewhere if you’d like.”

“Oh no. It’s fine.” Courtney’s heart sped up. “I’m going to make it an early night. I was up with the sun this morning.”

“Shaun was always an early bird,” Mary said, her eyes wistful. “Ever since he was a tiny baby. I remember telling him he’d pay for it when he had children of his own.” Her bottom lip wobbled, and Ellis reached out to cover her hand with his. The tightness in Courtney’s chest increased.

She hated the way they’d never recovered from Shaun’s death. Lainey would probably argue that Courtney hadn’t either. But at least she didn’t cry every time his name was mentioned. She felt sad, though. Sad that they were stuck in this awful time slip, forever mourning the child they’d lost.

They all had to work so much harder to make up for Shaun’s absence on the farm they lived on. Maybe that was why Courtney would never dream of leaving.

That and the fact that she loved the farm. Growing up, it had always been her childhood dream to live and work on a small farm like this one. It was in her blood – thanks to her grandparents who’d run their own small ranch back in West Virginia where she’d grown up. After her mom died, and her dad was working all the hours god sent, she’d spent a lot of time there.

And when her grandparents died, her dad had to sell the farm to pay all the debts on it. She'd been sixteen. By eighteen, she was studying for her associate's degree in agriculture, and had ended up working for Carwood, a huge agricultural company that specialized in selling grain and livestock to small farmers. That's how she'd met Shaun, when she'd come to Creek Edge Farm to discuss an order with him. He'd always joked that she'd fallen in love with the farm first, him second.

Now he was gone, but she was still here. Living in the small cottage on the other side of the fields. It was far enough away to give her privacy from the main farmhouse, with its own driveway and land surrounding it.

After they finished eating their dinner, Courtney and Mary cleaned up while Carl helped his dad repair a rotten riser on the front porch. Courtney glanced at her watch and guilt filled her up again.

"Thank you for dinner," she said to Mary, hugging the frail old woman tight.

"It's always good to see you. You know you can come over any time, right?"

Courtney nodded, a small smile on her lips. "I know."

Mary opened the back door. "Ellis, Carl?" she called out to her husband and son. "Courtney's leaving."

Ellis looked up from the board he was holding. "Be safe. Will we see you on Sunday?"

"Of course." Courtney smiled again. Her lips were starting to ache. "Bright and early for first service." Attending the First Baptist Church of Hartson's Creek was part of their Sunday routine.

Carl put down the hammer he was holding, and a tiny cloud of dust rose up from the ground. "I'll walk you out."

"No need. My car's just around the front."

But he was already standing, brushing the dirt from his knees. They were silent as they walked around the house to

where Courtney's old truck was parked. His patrol car was next to it, all new and shiny. "You sure you're okay?" he asked her.

"I'm fine." She gave him a quizzical look. "Why do you ask?"

"You seem different." He shrugged. "Edgy maybe."

Her poker face wasn't as good as she'd thought. The guilt that had been simmering beneath the surface rose to the top, making her mouth taste bitter. If he knew why she really wanted to hurry home, he wouldn't be looking at her with that soft expression right now. He'd be hurling insults at her.

*Whore. Slut.*

She pushed those thoughts away and reached for the truck door, but Carl beat her to it, pulling it open and standing to the side. "Your hair looks pretty," he told her, his voice rough as he took a strand between his fingers. She tried not to wince. "You should wear it down more often."

As soon as he dropped the curl, Courtney climbed into the driver's seat, her keys in her hand. "Thank you."

He put his hand on the top of the door frame, leaning in. "You thought about getting back out there?" he asked her. "It's been two years since Shaun died. And you're still young." His gaze dropped down to her bare legs.

Her breath caught in her throat. "No, I haven't."

He nodded. "Okay then." He leaned back, and went to close the door. "Drive carefully."

"Will do."

He closed the door and she slumped back against the seat. She shook her head and slid the key into the ignition, revving the gas as the engine roared to life.

And as she pulled away, leaving a trail of dust behind her, she thanked God that her cottage was on the other side of the fields. Where nobody could see what she was doing.

Tonight she'd be committing a sin she never wanted his family to find out about.

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HE KNOCKED on her front door at exactly nine o'clock. Courtney walked into the hallway, checking her reflection in the mirror she'd brought with her when she and Shaun had first gotten married. It had been a wedding gift to her parents, but since her mom had died, and her father remarried, neither of them had any need of it. A reminder of her childhood home.

After getting home that evening, she'd taken a shower, careful not to let the moisture reach her hair. Then she'd pulled on the lace lingerie she'd ordered online, too scared to be seen buying such pretty scraps in Hartson's Creek, where somebody was sure to notice. Then she'd pulled on a dress. Nothing fancy, just a cream colored casual dress embossed with red roses that skimmed her torso and flared out at her mid thigh.

She looked like somebody else. Somebody who knew what she was doing. The kind of woman who opened the door to a sexy guy and let him use her body the way they both wanted him to.

"What are you doing?" she whispered to her reflection, even though she knew exactly what was about to happen. She was going to burn in hell for it. Yet the adrenaline rush that came just from knowing he was there on her step was enough to make her not care.

Logan Hartson had that effect on her since the moment they met. It had been a few months earlier, when Harriet and Hester had escaped from the chicken run and made it all the way to Main Road, having so much fun squawking and dancing around on the blacktop that they didn't notice the car speeding toward them.

She'd ran all the way down the lane that led from the cottage toward town, her legs flying as she tried to reach them in time. Waving her hands, she'd screamed at them, but the sound of screeching brakes had drowned her voice out, the car

stopping feet away from the hens as they noticed it and squawked like crazy.

“What the fuck?” the man she now knew was Logan had muttered, climbing out of the shining black coupe. His angry eyes had met hers, and it felt like somebody had shoved their hand firmly inside of her chest. It was all it took for her not to stagger backward.

He was wearing a crisp white shirt, the sleeves rolled up to reveal an expensive looking watch. His gaze had dipped, taking in her way-too-short cut offs that she only wore when she was doing yard work. The tank she was wearing barely covered her breasts. And seeing as she hadn't planned to leave home, she didn't bother to put a bra on that morning. She knew he could see how hard her nipples had become.

“I'm sorry,” she said, breathless. “They must have climbed out through a gap in the coop.” She turned to scoop up Hester, but the brown feathery siren skipped out of her grasp.

The man sighed and reached for the chicken, grabbing her in his hands, before letting out a low curse. “Shit, that's sharp.”

Courtney's eyes had widened. “She scratches.” Stepping forward, she could already see the blood seeping from the cut on his hand. “I'm so sorry,” she said again. “Let me take her.”

“It's okay. You get the other one.” He looked up at the farm lane. “You live up there?” he asked, his eyes on her small cottage in the distance

“Yeah.”

“I'll carry her up.” He kicked the door to his car shut and started striding down the lane. She picked up a much-more compliant Harriet and hurried after him, trying to match his long, sure strides.

“I have a first aid kit at the house,” she told him. “I can clean up that cut for you. Are you up to date on your shots?”

“Had my annual appointment last month,” he muttered. Hester began squawking again, squirming in his grasp. She could see his jaw tighten.

His strong, square jaw. Damn, he was good looking. Not the kind of guy you expected to see around here at all.

They'd reached the house and she'd led him to the chicken run. Immediately, she spotted where the mesh had come loose on the side. Harriet and Hester were the only ones who'd noticed, the other hens too busy pecking and clucking to think of escape. She opened the door and put Harriet down. She went to take Hester from him and her mouth turned dry. He was staring at her legs, his eyes dark, his lips slightly open. Desire washed over her.

She couldn't remember the last time she felt this much heat pulsing inside her. Trying to keep her face impassive, she took the hen from him, their fingers sliding together for a moment.

"Thank you," she said as she closed the coop up, before she pulled the mesh back over the nail it had come loose from. "Let's get you cleaned up."

"Won't your husband mind you bringing a strange man into his kitchen?" the man asked, his voice thick and low.

"I'm not married." She turned to look at him. The heat in his stare made her breath catch. It had been so long since anybody had looked at her like that. She'd forgotten what it was like. "What's your name?"

"It's Logan. Logan Hartson. What's yours?"

"Courtney Roberts." She moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. His eyes followed the movement. "Come in." She pulled open the kitchen door and they walked inside. Nodding at the chair, she told him to sit while she pulled the first aid kit down from its home in the top cupboard.

She cleaned him up, her brow almost touching his as she dabbed at the cut in his hand. He was silent, apart from his soft breaths. Her mouth was dry as the desert as she tried to think of something to say to him. Anything to cut the tension between them. Her chest was tight, her thighs hot, and her heart hammering against her ribcage. She had no idea what to do with this need pulsing inside her.



She stuck a Band-Aid to his warm skin, running her finger over it to make sure it had adhered. Then she looked at him again, her expression serious as their gazes met. It felt like hours that they stared at each other, him sitting on that chair, her leaning over him. There was a pulse in his neck that she wanted to touch, to feel the scruff of his beard growth that must have appeared since he'd shaved this morning.

“Courtney,” he finally said, his voice feeling like a caress against her skin.

“Yeah?”

“Put the first aid kit down.”

“Okay.” She did as she was told, her eyes still on his.

He reached out for her, his palm pressing against her back until she had no choice but to straddle his thighs. He slid his hand up, cupping her neck, his hand warm and sure and everything she didn't know she needed. Slowly, he pulled her face to his until she could feel his breath against her lips.

Then his mouth was on hers, demanding and searing, his tongue sliding against hers until the desire was like a fire engulfing them both.

It was two hours later, when she was tangled in his arms in the bed she'd once shared with Shaun that she remembered Logan's car was abandoned on the road for anybody to see.

And right then, she didn't give a damn.

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## CHAPTER THREE



Logan leaned on the doorjamb of Courtney Roberts' cottage, his elbow bent, his shirt sleeve riding up. The Rolex on his wrist told him it was one minute past nine. Not that he needed a watch to tell him. The desire pulsing through his body was the nighttime equivalent of a sundial.

The corner of his lip curled up as he remembered the way she'd looked that first day they'd met, her curvy ass almost hanging out of the frayed cut offs she was wearing, her small-yet-perfect breasts barely hidden by the ribbed black tank covered in straw and dust. Her hair had been up, a cloud of curls hanging from the back of her head, revealing her wide blue eyes and perfectly bowed lips.

And in that moment, he'd felt like a storm had erupted inside him. A need so strong that he couldn't think of anything but her. How she would feel. How she would taste. How she would sigh. It had been completely crazy. So was the hard-on he'd sported as soon as she'd started to clean up the scratch on his hand. He could feel the desire for her coursing through his veins.

He had to have her or die trying.

Logan blamed it on the dry spell he'd been having, thanks to working all his breathing hours on getting the latest restaurant ready for opening. He'd never been good at relationships, and that was an understatement. No woman liked coming second to his work, and that's how it had always been. Working late nights, weekends, all the times a girlfriend

would want him to be around. He'd received enough ultimatums to know that when it came to relationships and work he'd always choose the latter.

Maybe he was lucky that Courtney lived in Hartson's Creek, rather than down the road from his apartment in Boston. He wasn't sure he'd have the control not to want to see her constantly.

But this was a booty call for her, as it was for him as well. She wasn't looking for a relationship. She'd made that clear the first afternoon they'd slept together. Asked him to keep it quiet, and not to expect anything from her. He'd gleaned enough to know she was a widow of two years, still living on her husband's family land.

And that nobody had touched her in those years until him.

The memory of her responsiveness made him rock hard. She opened the door and there she was. Her curls tumbling around her shoulders, a pretty dress skimming her amazing curves, and those piercing blue eyes as wide as the sky. She looked so damn feminine it brought the animal out in him. Without saying a word, he stepped inside, kicking the door shut with his heel, and pinned her against the wall, crashing his lips against hers.

She gasped against his mouth, then arched her body into his, deepening the kiss until they were a tangle of desire. The hard-on he'd had since he'd stepped on her stoop was like an iron bar against her. He pulled her up, her legs curling around his waist, her arms around his neck, the warm heat of her welcoming him in.

Her fingers caressed the short hair at the back of his neck as he lowered his mouth to her neck, sucking and kissing her delicate skin until she let out a low moan. It did something to him, that sound. Made him need to hear it again and again. To make her feel toe curling pleasure until she was breathless and high.

He already knew where the bedroom was. Up the short flight of stairs where he had to duck his head as to not knock it against the ceiling. Her bed was neatly made, the covers

tucked in, a white embroidered runner at the bottom. He kicked his shoes off then laid her down on the mattress, taking in the sight of her perfection against the whiteness of the sheets.

“Take your dress off.”

Her eyes flashed with desire. She did exactly what she was told, slowly peeling the fabric over her dark curls before throwing it on the floor. She was wearing ivory lingerie, the lace fabric so sheer he could see the dark shadow of her nipples through them. And damn if it didn't make him harder than ever. Still fully-clothed, he crawled over her, kissing her shoulders, her chest, the swell of her breasts. Then he lowered his mouth to her soft stomach, loving the taste of her.

Her breath hitched as he pulled the lace cups down to expose her breasts. He closed his mouth over one nipple to suck her tightly. She liked it rough. Hard. She'd made that clear from the start. And he was going to give it to her every way she desired.

But first he needed to taste her. Yanking the pretty panties from her ass, he slid them down her legs and threw them to the floor. She went to take her bra off and he pulled her hands away. “That stays on,” he said gruffly.

“Okay.”

He yanked her thighs apart, his thumbs digging into her soft skin. He dropped his head to breathe her in. “You smell delicious.”

Looking up, he could see the blush staining her cheeks. Loved the way he was in control of her blood flow the way he was in control of her. To test his theory, he slid his finger into the warmth of her, feeling the wetness, the heat, the need.

She gasped as he followed his finger with his tongue, licking at her like she was some kind of sweet dessert. Then he did it again, harder this time. Enough to make her cry out, her thighs tightening around him as he licked and teased.

When she came, her moans muffled by her hands, her thighs quivering like Jell-O, he stood and unbuttoned his shirt,

throwing it on the floor next to her panties. His pants were next, the release of his zipper a relief to his steel hardness, then his shorts and socks, landing in a pile next to the bed.

All he had left the condom he'd taken from his wallet. She was watching him, her throat undulating as she swallowed hard. He slid it onto his erection, loving the way her eyes were so wide and needy.

He'd thought of this moment for the past month. Fantasized how it would feel to be inside her again. Whether she'd be as sweet and responsive as he remembered. As he climbed over her sweet body, caging her in with his arms and pushed himself into her, he knew it was even better.

He'd found a little slice of heaven, and he wanted it to last forever.

---

“YOU OKAY?” Logan asked her an hour later. It was pitch black outside, though they hadn't bothered to close the curtains. The only creatures who could see in would be the chickens, and they were too busy roosting to care what Courtney and Logan were doing.

“I'm good.” She stretched her arms languidly, then turned on her side to look at him. He brushed the curls away from her face, his fingers trailing along the skin behind her ear.

“Do you ever wonder what it would be like if we were together?” He blinked when he realized he'd said it out loud. Those were dangerous words. Most women would take them as an invitation.

But Courtney laughed and he knew she hadn't taken him seriously.

“We'd drive each other crazy,” she said, her eyes twinkling as they met his. “Look at how incompatible we are. You're a city boy, I'm a country girl. You'll never be the kind of guy who'd be happy cleaning out the chicken coop.”

He laughed at the thought of it. "I'd drive *you* crazy," he told her. "Just like every woman I've ever dated."

She propped her chin up on her hand and gave him a speculative look. "That's because you're a love 'em and leave 'em type."

He raised an eyebrow. "Is that what you think of me?"

Her lips twitched. "Sorry. Did I offend you?"

"No. It's just interesting hearing how you see me."

She ran a finger down his neck, to the dip at the base of his throat. "You're good looking. Successful. If you wanted to be in a relationship you would be. At our age there are more women looking for relationships than men."

He tipped his head to the side. "How old are you?"

"Thirty-one."

He bit down a smile. "That makes you older than me by a bit."

"What?" Her eyes widened. "No way."

He couldn't help but laugh at her outraged expression. "Way," he said, deadpan. "And for the record, I'll be your boy toy anytime." It was interesting the way she demanded nothing. In the past few months since they'd met, he barely called or messaged her between his visits to Hartson's Creek. Neither did she, come to that. Their only correspondence would be him checking to see if she was free before he visited.

She didn't complain about him ignoring her, or asked him for something more than sex. It was every man's dream. Yet there was part of him that wished he could offer her more.

"It's a good thing I'm only using you for your body," she said with a grin, as if she could read his mind. "Otherwise the town would be outraged."

"The town would be outraged anyway." He shrugged. "Everybody's always up in each other's business here." So different to Boston where nobody cared a damn about what you did.

“That’s why we’re keeping this quiet,” she murmured. “It’s easier this way.”

She was right. It was better for the both of them. And if there was still part of him that wondered what life would be like for them in a parallel universe – one where he wasn’t a workaholic and she wasn’t a country girl happy to live off the land? Well he’d ignore it, because she was right. This arrangement was good. Maybe he could stop himself from messing things up the way he always did.

Yeah, and maybe the pigs in the pens behind Courtney’s cottage would sprout some wings and take flight. Either scenario felt pretty unlikely to him.

---

THE FIRST BAPTIST Church of Hartson’s Creek was packed on Sunday. Courtney slid into the scratched wooden pew next to Mary and Ellis, the way she always had for the past eight years. Before he died, Shaun always sat on her left, his back ramrod straight, his gaze trained on Reverend Maitland as he gave his sermon from the pulpit. Once, right after they’d gotten married, she’d tried to hold his hand, and he’d pushed her away roughly.

She hadn’t tried again.

“Morning,” Carl said, sitting in the small space at the end of the pew. She had to shuffle closer to Mary to give him room, but still she could feel the roughness of his wool jacket against her arms, and the warmth of his thigh against her leg.

“Good morning.” She gave him a nod.

“It’s a beautiful day.”

She glanced at the window, seeing the sun shining through the colored glass. “Yes it is.” Apart from the fact she was sitting in church after spending Friday night sinning. She was lucky not to have burst into flames.

She took a deep breath. Nobody knew. They’d been careful. Once a month at her cottage where nobody could see

them. That's not the way rumors started around here.

"Hello, darling," Mary said, leaning across Courtney to give her son a kiss on the cheek. "I wasn't sure if you were working this morning."

"I'm rostered for this afternoon. Thought I'd come and join you all." He shot Courtney a glance. "Make sure you're all okay."

"You're such a good boy." Mary patted his cheek then sat up, moving herself out of Courtney's space. "You look just like your brother this morning." Her eyes shone as she looked at him. "It warms my heart to have you here."

The organ music started up, and everybody stood. Carl's hand brushed against Courtney's as she reached for the hymn book. He took it from her, and opened it to the right page, holding it out so they both could see.

"I drove past your house Friday night," Carl murmured, his voice barely audible above the brash notes of the organ and the sound of voices. "Saw a car there. Anybody I know?"

Courtney kept her eyes trained on the hymn book, her lips moving to the words though no sound came out. He'd seen Logan's rental car outside her house? The thought of it made her want to hurl. "Just a friend."

Mary's sweet voice sang out loudly next to her. The thought of her and Ellis learning what she'd been doing made Courtney's stomach tighten. They were still mourning their son. She should be too.

She was definitely going to hell.

"You should watch that," Carl murmured, glancing at her from the corner of his eyes. "People will talk."

*You already are.* She managed to form a smile on her lips. "Of course," she said softly. "We wouldn't want that." Finally she got up the nerve to ask him. "Why were you driving past my place anyway?"

"You're my brother's wife," he told her, his brow dipping. "It's my job to protect you. Shaun would have wanted it."



Would he? It was hard to remember the way Shaun thought sometimes. Or what he would have wanted her to do once he was gone. It wasn't something they ever talked about. He hadn't been sick or anything. Neither of them had any idea that the day he slammed the front door of their cottage and tore out of the driveway he was only minutes away from losing his life. She swallowed hard, blinking her eyes to get those thoughts out of her mind.

He was gone. It didn't matter that they'd argued like crazy that day. Or all the days before that. And she certainly didn't need to keep wondering if he'd intended to drive into the oncoming truck, rather than it being an accident, the way the police investigation had said.

Two years of grief counseling was supposed to have pushed those thoughts away.

"Look, there's Rita Clark. She's got her grandbabies with her," Mary whispered to her left, as the organ music faded away and they all sat down. "Aren't they beautiful?"

"They are." She gave Mary a tight smile and tried to ignore the way Carl's leg pressed against hers once again.

It wasn't until Reverend Maitland walked to the pulpit and opened the bible that she finally felt her body start to relax. At least Carl and Mary had to look at him for a while instead of her.

Right now, she was grateful for the respite.

---

AS SOON AS he walked into Murphy's Diner, in the center of the town square, Logan knew it was a bad idea. Becca had called ahead, reserving a table for their large party, knowing how busy the diner got on Sundays after church. Aunt Gina had wanted to cook for them all, seeing as half of her boys would be leaving town later that day, but they'd argued her down. She wasn't getting any younger, and the Hartson clan was getting bigger. With Gray's growing family, and Tanner's

new wife, there would be twelve of them sitting around the table.

But he hadn't banked on glancing over and seeing Courtney Roberts sitting there, with two people who looked to be in their sixties, and a man who was sitting way too close to her for Logan's liking.

*Simmer down.* They had an arrangement. One that didn't include him wondering why the guy seemed to be touching her face right now.

"Who are you looking at?" Becca asked, following the direction of his gaze. "Oh, there are the Roberts. You know them, right? They run Creek Edge Farm. We used to go to the pumpkin patch there when we were kids." She waved at them, completely unaware of how tense Logan felt. "They lost their son a couple of years ago. It was such a horrible accident. That's his widow, and his brother, Carl." She tipped her head to the side. "Do you think there's something between them? They're sitting awful close."

"Stop gossiping," Logan said sharply. He immediately regretted his tone. He sighed and pulled a chair out for Becca. "Sorry, I'm not used to small town talk anymore."

Becca didn't seem bothered by his admonishment. "She's so pretty, isn't she? Such a shame to be widowed so young."

Logan looked at Courtney again. She was wearing a gauzy white blouse, printed with tiny grey flowers, unbuttoned at the neck to reveal the delicate line of her collarbone. He swallowed hard, remembering how soft her skin was. How warm her thighs were, how she'd moaned long and loud as he took her over and again.

He hadn't spoken to her since. That wasn't in their agreement. It was supposed to be simple. They both had itches they needed to scratch. Nothing more. And in exactly three hours he'd be catching a flight back to Boston and work. To a world where farms and the pretty women who worked on them didn't belong.

“What are you going to eat?” Becca asked, pulling him out of his thoughts. He looked up to see Cam ordering oatmeal with fruit on the side. His twin ate like a professional even when he wasn’t being lectured by his team nutritionist. Maybe that’s part of what made him so successful at what he did.

“Can you order me pancakes and bacon?” Logan said, standing. “I need to make a quick call.”

Becca blinked. “Sure. You want a drink?”

“Coffee and OJ please.”

“Are there problems at work?” she asked, her voice sympathetic.

He nodded, even though it was a complete lie. He didn’t need to make a call at all. He just wanted some fresh air, somewhere away from Courtney Roberts, because he couldn’t stand watching that son-of-a-bitch leaning in to whisper in her ear any longer.

As soon as he stepped onto the sidewalk outside Murphy’s, he exhaled heavily. He was being crazy. That’s what this town did to him. Closed in on him like a crusher. He needed to be calm. Tonight he’d be back in Boston, back to the job he loved, in the industry he thrived in.

He leaned his head on the wall and looked out at the green square on the other side of the road. People were scattered across the lawns, others seated on the benches that bordered the bandstand at the center. There were trees dotted all around, their leaves not yet vibrant red and oranges, though it was only a matter of time. Despite the golden sun and blue sky above him, there was already a hint of fall in the air.

Against his better judgment, Logan pulled his phone from his pocket and tapped out a message.

*You look beautiful in that blouse. Wish I was ripping it off of you right now.*

As soon as he pressed send, he turned to look through the windows, over to the corner where she was sitting with her dead husband’s family. He could tell from her frown that her

phone had buzzed. She pulled it from the purse next to her and unlocked the screen, blinking as she read the words.

He tapped out another message.

*Look out of the window.*

He could see her swallow hard. She stuffed her phone back into her purse, then lifted her coffee cup to her lips, slowly turning her head to look out of the window. As soon as their gazes clashed he felt it again. That need. The desire. The crazy feeling that the world was tipping sideways.

He stuffed his phone back into his jeans pocket and breathed in a lungful of air.

The sooner he flew home the better. Boston. That was reality. This was just a fantasy for the both of them. A respite from the crazy busy lives they led.

Even if his heart wanted it to be something more than that.

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## CHAPTER FOUR



“*T*he zoning committee has turned our late license down,” Paris told Logan, gritting her teeth as she stomped into his makeshift office at the back of the restaurant they were renovating.

Logan looked up from the table he was using as a desk, his laptop open in front of him. “It’s been a bad day here, too. The electricity in here is kaput. They’re gonna have to rip out the walls to see where the loose connection is. And the shelves we ordered from Italy are stuck in customs. I’m trying to work out who to bribe.”

Paris leaned on the wall and let out a long sigh. Her long dark hair was pulled back, revealing her exotic bone structure and almond shaped eyes. As always, she was exquisitely dressed, wearing a pair of black cigarette pants and skyscraper green stilettos, along with a gauzy white blouse that left nothing to the imagination.

He’d met Paris five years ago, when he was looking at opening his first restaurant and needed investors. They’d been introduced by a mutual friend and they’d hit it off immediately. It was crazy really. She was a trust fund baby born and bred in exclusive Beacon Hill. Had been to prep school followed by Radcliffe and then a year traveling Europe.

He, on the other hand, had scraped his way through college thanks to a small scholarship and financial aid. He hadn’t planned on that. An accident at sixteen had ended the football career he’d planned to share with his brother. His vision of a full sports scholarship followed by a lustrous career had

disappeared in one horrible collision followed by an eight hour surgery.

A different man might have looked at Cam's glittering career and wondered what could have been. But Logan didn't have time for that. He was too busy trying to rise to the top of Boston's restaurant industry. As though he needed to prove to himself he was still *somebody*, even if he wasn't the somebody he thought he was going to be.

"I've got a contact on the zoning committee. I'll see if they're free for dinner tonight to help that issue along," Paris said, tipping her head to the side. "You look tired. Have you been getting any sleep?"

Her voice had the short clipped vowels native to New England. She'd teased him about his southern twang when they'd first met, and he'd teased her right back. Maybe that's why they worked together so well. Neither of them took themselves too seriously.

And they both worked like dogs.

"We had the inspectors stop in at *Touch of Class* yesterday," Logan told her, referring to their restaurant in Back Bay. "I want to make an action plan to address their concerns."

She wrinkled her nose. "Was it bad?"

"Nah. But I don't want to give them any reason to come back. It's disruptive. That place is fully booked for the next six weekends. I want the staff to concentrate on the customers."

Paris walked around the table and put her hands on his shoulders, digging her fingers in to loosen the knots. "You need to relax."

"I'm okay," he told her. "I'll probably go to the gym later. Box it out."

"Well it's either that or sex." Paris laughed, tossing her long, sleek ponytail over her shoulder. "You're just as bad as I am. Though I've got my eye on this guy from Beacon Hill." She glanced at her watch, then brushed her lips against his cheek. "Don't work too hard. I need you alive for our next project. There's this amazing warehouse in South End that'll

be coming on the market soon. They've promised to let us see it first. It's the perfect location for the next restaurant."

He felt a little tingle in his spine. They were expanding aggressively, but he liked that. Growing their empire made him tick. It was who he was, what he did.

For the past five years it had defined him.

"Send me the details when you have them," he told her with a nod.

"Of course." She gave him a grin. "Now go and sort out that customs problem. I'll talk to you later." She blew him a kiss and walked out of the door, pulling it closed behind her.

Logan collapsed back in his chair, running a hand through his hair as he exhaled. For the past few weeks he'd felt on edge, and it had nothing to do with the restaurant or the electric or even the damn customs problem. He dealt with that stuff every single day. He was good at what he did – one of the best, and that wasn't boasting. It was just the reality of working eighty-plus hours a week in the industry he loved.

He let his head fall back, his eyelids closing as he took a deep breath. And in the darkness of his vision he saw her. *Courtney*. The way she'd looked beneath him in her bed. With her dark curls spilling out across the sheets and her piercing blue eyes trained on him. Almost immediately the strange twist in his gut relented, and the muscles in his shoulders relaxed.

She was fresh air. The light to the shadows of his life. Maybe that's what he needed to make himself feel complete again.

A night with the country girl who made him think life could sometimes be simple. If only he'd let it.

Logan pulled the phone from his pocket and quickly tapped out a message.

***I'll be in town the weekend after next. Are you free to meet?***

It took five minutes for the reply to come back. Five minutes of him shifting in his seat and trying to concentrate on the laptop in front of him. And as soon as his phone buzzed, he snatched it up and stared at the screen.

*Yes I am.*

Thank god. Maybe now he'd finally get some work done.

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COURTNEY WAS SORTING through seed catalogs in the main barn when the storm hit. For the past two weeks she'd been working like a horse, starting with the chickens at first light, followed by grading the corn, and calling their customers to make sure they had their orders in. Then there were all the jobs they never had time to do during growing season. Repairing fences, buying new seeds and livestock, as well as selling those they didn't need any more.

And of course there was the paperwork. There was always so much of that. It had been Mary's job when Courtney had first arrived on the farm, but over the years she'd slowly taken it over, liaising with the USDA and the IRS and every other governmental body who wanted something from them.

Creek Edge Farm was small in comparison to some of the vast fields surrounding them, the ones owned by conglomerates who farmed them to the bare bones. Creek Edge couldn't compete with the prices they offered on their grain, any more than they could afford the kind of machinery they had. Last year, they'd bought a new crop sprayer – a huge tractor-like machine that Ellis was driving out in the freshly-reaped fields at the moment, spraying weed killer to get rid of the growth that always seemed to come no matter how hard they tried to fight it.

That sprayer had cost almost three hundred thousand dollars. They'd used up the last of the insurance money she'd gotten after Shaun had died, and had to take out two additional loans, but it had been worth it. And Ellis had been like a kid



with a new toy since it arrived. It had been good to see him smile again.

The fact was, they'd all been struggling since Shaun died. He'd been the strongest of them all, laboring with his dad in the fields from dusk until dawn. Ellis wasn't getting any younger, and as hard as Courtney worked, she'd never be able to do as much as Shaun had. Didn't stop her from trying though.

A loud clap of thunder blasted through the air. She looked up from the catalog and frowned. In the fall, the weather could turn from a heat wave to a tropical storm in minutes. Their proximity to the mountains in the west caused them to have their own ecosystem. Hot and humid in the summer, cold and snowy in the winter, with spring and autumn never really knowing what to do.

She was wearing an old pair of jeans and a black tank she'd pulled on before the sun had even come up this morning, and the abrupt change in weather made her skin prickle into goose bumps as she ran outside to make sure there was no equipment in the yard. But before she could even look around the clouds opened up. Sheets of rain crashed down onto the warm concrete, and soaking her to the skin in seconds.

Ellis came out of the main farmhouse, pulling a raincoat on. "I left the sprayer in the field when I took a break," he called out over the sound of the downpour. "I should bring it in."

She took a look at his frail body, then shook her head. "I'll get it," she called out. "Do you have the keys?"

"Left them in the cab." He pressed his lips together. "You sure?"

"Of course." There was no way she was letting him get soaked. And she could run faster than him.

The sky lit up with another fork of lightning, followed by rattling thunder. She ran through the open gates to the field, her tennis shoes sinking into the soft soil, with dark clumps of mud caking against the cotton. By the time she made it to the

sprayer her clothes were clinging to her skin, heavy with rain and causing her to shiver from the cold. She shook her head like a dog, then climbed into the cab, gritting her teeth to stop them from chattering as she started up the ignition and slowly drove the sprayer back to the metal pole barn where they kept all their equipment.

Water poured down the windshield as she steered the huge machine through the open gates and into the main concrete yard. Ellis was waiting for her inside the barn, giving her a smile as she parked the sprayer next to the tractor, and climbed down from the cab.

“Here,” he said, giving her a towel. “You’re soaked. Go into the house. Mary will make you a warm drink.”

“I’m fine,” Courtney said, trying to stop the shivers from wracking her body. “I’ll help you finish up here. Are the animals okay?”

“The sheep are spooked, but they always are. The rest are all sheltering in their stalls. Now go inside and dry off before you catch a hell of a cold.”

“Okay.” She smiled at him, rubbing the rain from her arms with the old towel he’d given her. It was sweet that he worried about her health. It wasn’t often that anybody cared for her.

But when she made it home later that evening, her head pounding, her body shivering even though it was warm and cozy inside, she realized the hot drink and steaming shower hadn’t stopped her from getting sick after all.

The day before Logan Hartson was due back in town.

## CHAPTER FIVE



Courtney couldn't eat anything at all the next day. Even the thought of food made her want to hurl. She was laying on the sofa, a blanket wrapped around her, hugging a box of tissues. If she wasn't feeling so horrible, she'd be feeling guilty that she wasn't working today.

And even worse, Logan hadn't replied to her text letting him know she was sick and they'd have to cancel. Maybe he was angry. It was strange how the thought of not seeing him made her empty stomach gripe even harder. She had no idea when he was due back in town again.

The sound of a car engine rumbled over the sound of her sneezes, and she tried to turn on the sofa to look out of the window.

A police cruiser was outside. Carl's. His parents had probably called to tell him she was sick. Courtney sighed at the thought of having to face him like this.

He rapped at the door and she called out to let him know it was unlocked, too exhausted to get off the sofa and be hospitable in her usual way.

"Hey," he said, frowning as he closed the door behind him. "You should keep this locked. You don't know who might try their luck and break in."

"It normally is."

His gaze flickered over to her. "Mom told me you were sick. I thought I'd stop by and see if you need anything." He walked over, his brow still pulled down as he touched her

brow. “You’re burning up. Are you sure you shouldn’t be in bed?”

Courtney picked up a tissue and blew her nose loudly. “Probably,” she agreed. “But I couldn’t sleep up there. Thought I’d come down here and make myself a pot of hot tea.” She threw the tissue into the trash can next to her, then pulled the blanket back up. She was wearing an old pair of pajamas and nothing else. From the way Carl was staring at her chest, she felt exposed.

“I could stop by after my shift,” he suggested. “Bring you some take out or something.” His lips curled up. “There’s a new Italian place down the highway. I hear they do an amazing chicken parm.”

Her stomach turned over. “I don’t think I can eat anything. I’ll just sleep. Thank you anyway.”

He sat down on the chair opposite the couch.

“Sorry,” she croaked out. “I should have offered you a seat.”

He grinned. “It’s okay. I figure being sick lets you off. Are you sure there’s nothing I can do? I’ve got thirty minutes left on my break.”

“Honestly, you should leave me alone. I’m sick, grumpy, and all I’m going to do is sleep it off. I’ve got some medicine. I’ll just take that and feel sorry for myself.” She let her head fall back against the sofa. “Hopefully I’ll be well enough for work on Monday.”

“You shouldn’t work so hard. That’s probably half of the problem.” Carl leaned forward, resting his elbows on his navy-covered thighs. “You should let somebody look after you.” His voice dropped. “Somebody like me.”

Courtney swallowed hard, then immediately regretted it. Pain radiated through her throat. “Carl, I...”

He lifted a hand. “No, hear me out. *Please.*” There wasn’t a hint of humor on his face as his gaze met hers. “You work too hard trying to keep this place going. And Mom and Dad are getting older. They can’t keep doing this forever either.

Things aren't going to get any easier for any of you. You need to start thinking about your future." He looked down, his brows knitting together. "About letting somebody take care of you the way Shaun would have wanted."

Courtney's head whirled. She didn't want him to say it, because then it would be out in the open. It was hard enough with his side glances and unasked questions that made her feel uncomfortable as hell.

But this? This was so much worse.

"I want to be the one to take care of you. I have an apartment, a good career. And I know we'd be compatible. I think the same way Shaun did. The same way you do." He ran the tip of his tongue along his bottom lip. "If you left this place, we could persuade Mom and Dad to sell. It would be easier on everybody."

Courtney opened her mouth, but the tightness in her chest remained. "They'd be heartbroken if they had to sell the farm." And so would she.

Carl stood and walked over to the sofa, his face soft as he lifted her feet and sat down, replacing them on his lap. It took everything she had not to recoil from his touch.

"They'll listen to us. They always do." He gave her a half smile. "That's why we make such a good team."

"You're Shaun's brother. I couldn't..." Her voice cracked. The thought of being with him made her stomach lurch. "We couldn't, Carl. Not even if I was ready to start a new relationship, which I'm not. It's just wrong. People would talk."

"I can wait until you're ready," he told her, leaning close.

"I could never ask your parents to sell this place," she told him. "It's their life. They already lost Shaun. It would kill them to lose the farm, too." That's one of the reasons she was still here. Paying penance, trying to keep this place afloat for them. Mary and Ellis were like parents to her, and she couldn't let them down.

“You don’t have to make a decision now.” He ran his finger down the sole of her right foot. “Just think about it. You’ll see I’m right. I’d make you happy, Courtney.” He cleared his throat. “I know that Shaun wasn’t always...” he trailed off, as though trying to find the right words. “Good to you. I heard the arguments. I’m not like that, I promise you. I’d never hurt you.”

He released her foot and stood, raking his hand through his hair. “I should get back to work. But call me if you need anything, okay?”

“Okay,” she managed to croak.

“You sure you don’t want me to bring you anything later?” he asked. “Or I could come over tomorrow. It’s my day off.”

She shook her head quickly. “No. I’m just going to rest. But thank you.”

He leaned down to kiss her on the cheek, the aroma of coffee wafting from his breath. Swallowing hard, she closed her eyes, wishing this all away.

“Feel better soon. And don’t forget to lock the damn door,” he told her.

Moments after he closed the front door firmly behind him, her eyes began to droop. She submitted to the exhaustion. Welcomed it, even, because if she was sleeping she didn’t need to think about what a mess her life was becoming.

She’d beat herself up when she was feeling better.

---

“HEY, do you ever check your phone?” Paris said, grabbing Logan’s arm as he walked out of the restaurant. His car was parked on the sidewalk, his overnight bag safely stashed in the trunk. It was almost two in the afternoon and he had exactly an hour until boarding. Even with VIP parking it was going to be tight.

“Sorry,” Logan said, shrugging his suit jacket off. He pulled the passenger door open and hung it on the hook above the window. “My meeting with the contractors ran over, and I’m late for the airport. Is it important?”

Her brows dipped. “You’re going to the airport? Why?”

He loosened his tie and circled his neck. “Because I’m heading home for the weekend.”

“But I’ve arranged a meeting with the events coordinator for tomorrow. To plan out the opening celebration. And I thought we could take a look at the new place in South End on Sunday.” She tipped her head to the side. “What’s so important about Nowheresville anyway? I thought you hated that place.”

“It’s where my family is.”

Paris let out a sigh. “Cam isn’t there, though. Doesn’t he have a game on Sunday? Won’t you miss it?”

“I’ll be back for the game. And I’ll be working Sunday night and all next week. It’s just two nights, Paris, and I’ve arranged cover at the restaurants.” He shook his head. “I have no idea why I’m explaining myself to you.”

“Because we’re supposed to be a team, Logan. We both know this industry isn’t a part time job. And it never has been for you. You’re always working, the same way I always am.” The corner of her lip pulled down. “But recently... I don’t know, it’s like you’re having some kind of mid-life crisis or something. And we both know you’re too young for that. What the hell is in Hartson’s Creek that’s pulling you back?”

He pictured Courtney laying naked on her bed, her dark curls everywhere as he ran his rough hands up her thighs.

“Two of my brothers are there. And my nephews. I want to see them.”

“You’ve never liked kids,” she pointed out. “Neither of us have. How many times have we talked about that over a bottle of Macallan? That’s why we’re so good at this. We dedicate everything to our careers. We know that kids and family get in the way of that.” She let out a mouthful of air. “Right?”

He checked the large silver watch on his wrist. “I gotta go if I want to catch this flight. Arrange those meetings for next week and I’ll be there.”

She nodded, her lips pressed tightly together.

“I’ll be there,” he repeated,

She gave him a smile. “Good. Because I can’t do this on my own. I need you, Logan. And if you can’t be here then we need to rethink bringing somebody else on board.”

“We don’t need anybody else. We’ve got this.” He walked around the car, pulling the driver’s door open. “I’ll see you Sunday night.”

She shrugged. “Okay.”

He threw his wallet and phone on the passenger seat, shaking his head at all the notifications filling the screen as it momentarily lit up.

He’d answer them all once he was through check in. When he was finally on his way to *her*. His own, personal sweet slice of oblivion.

Right now, the thought of *her* in his arms was the only thing keeping him going.



## CHAPTER SIX



Courtney's eyelids flickered, the pounding in her head worse than ever. It took her a moment to realize that though her head was hurting, the noise was coming from elsewhere.

*The front door.*

She lifted her head, then winced and dropped it back to the cushion, and barely managed to open her dry lips.

"It's open," she struggled to croak. She was surrounded by darkness. What time was it? She remembered Carl leaving, then nothing after that. Had she been asleep all this time?

"Hi. How are you feeling?"

The smooth, deep sound of *his* voice made her eyes wide. Her breath caught in her throat as she looked toward the door and saw the outline of a tall, built man against the open front door.

"Logan?" she said, her voice catching. "Didn't you get my message?"

He walked inside, kicking the door closed behind him. In the gloom of her living room she could see him holding something. It looked like a brown bag. The kind you got at the grocery store.

"I got your message, but by then I'd already checked in at the airport." He looked around. "Is it okay if I turn a light on?"

"The kitchen switch is right next to you."

He flicked it on, the brightness shooting straight through her skull. If she didn't feel so sick, she'd probably worry about him seeing her like this. Her hair lank, her face pale, her lips so dry she could grow a cactus in them.

He put the bag down on the counter that divided the living room from the kitchen. She watched, bemused, as he began to take the items out one by one.

A rotisserie chicken, in a plastic container. Carrots, leeks, and onions, along with sachets of herbs and spices she couldn't quite read the labels of.

"I didn't want you to come all this way and be disappointed," she said, her voice thick with exhaustion. "I don't think I'm up for sex right now."

The corner of his mouth quirked up. "That's not why I'm here. I'm making you dinner."

"You're what?" She managed to turn on her side, even though every muscle in her body complained about the movement.

"I'm going to make you chicken soup." A smile played at his lips. "It's the only cure for when you have a fever like yours."

"You're cooking for me?" She blinked, not quite understanding thanks to the fog in her brain.

He shrugged. "It's what I do. I worked in a kitchen to pay my way through college." He leaned on the counter and caught her gaze. "I was pretty good at it, too. I figure you haven't got anybody to cook for you, so I'll do it." He looked around the kitchen. "Where are your pans?"

"In the cupboard next to the stove." She frowned. Was this normal behavior? Did hook ups usually cook for you when you were sick? She'd have to ask Lainey, she'd know. Every slice of human life passed through the salon after all. "Are you sure you want to cook after coming all this way?"

Nobody had ever cooked for her before. Even when she was as sick as a dog, Shaun would either buy takeout or go to his mom's, leaving Courtney to sweat it out in bed. She had no

idea what to make of it as Logan made himself at home in her kitchen, sweating vegetables in the huge soup pan, the savory aroma filling the downstairs of her cottage. At one point she must have drifted off, because she woke to him holding a glass of water to her lips.

“Drink,” he said softly. “You look dehydrated.”

“I keep forgetting.” She swallowed a mouthful of the cool liquid, and it tasted like nectar on her tongue. “I think I need to take more medicine, too. Can you pass the box?”

He grabbed the package from her coffee table and popped a pill through the foil. She shivered as he pressed it against her mouth. Okay, so she wasn't *that* sick.

Though she had a feeling she'd have to be dying not to be affected by Logan Hartson's touch.

“The soup will be ready in half an hour,” he told her. “Why don't you take a shower? It'll make you feel better.”

“I don't think I can stand up.” She gave him a weak smile.

“I'll get in with you.” He shrugged. “I'll hold you up.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh no, I couldn't.”

A half-smile curled his lips. “Why not?”

“Because we'd be...”

“Naked?” he offered. “It's okay. I don't know if you remember, but I've seen it all before. Real close and personal.”  
*Was that a wink?*

A shower sounded pretty good right now. She hadn't had one since yesterday, but the thought of him being close to her funky body made her want to cry. “I don't know.”

“I promise it'll be all above board.” He held his hand up in a salute. “Scout's honor.”

“You were never a Boy Scout,” she croaked.

“Sure was.” He lifted an eyebrow. “Got my Eagle Scout, too. I had the most spirit in our whole troop.”

She tried to picture him as a boy, in a khaki shirt covered with badges, along with a colorful scarf around his neck, and started to laugh. It turned into a choke, and the smile dissolved from his face, as he crouched in front of her.

“You okay?”

She nodded. “Just don’t say anything funny. Or at least give me some warning first.”

He put his palm on her face, the warmth of him making her want to sigh. He was close enough for her to inhale the soft spice of his cologne. Damn if it didn’t do something to her.

“I promise not to make you laugh anymore.” He traced the line of her cheek with his finger. “Come on, let me help you in the shower. No sexy times, I promise. You’ll feel better and that’ll make me feel better. Then you can have some soup and get back to sleep.”

Shower, soup, and sleep. All three of them sounded good right now, especially coming from his mouth. “Okay.” She nodded. “A shower would be good.”

The ‘no sexy times’, not so much. But she was sick, even if the nerve endings in her body protested otherwise. And if the way he held her so softly and tenderly as the spray rained down on their naked bodies made her yearn for something she couldn’t have? She’d think about that later, too.

Right now, he wanted to take care of her, and she wanted him to do exactly that. Analysis could wait for another day.

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“THAT WAS DELICIOUS. THANK YOU,” she croaked, laying her spoon down in the empty bowl. She’d managed to sit at the kitchen table with him, her body revived from their long, hot shower. With her dark curls braided into a damp plait, she looked beautiful despite the exhaustion that made her eyelids droop and her shoulders sag.

“You’re welcome.” Logan took her empty bowl and piled it on top of his own. “I’ve put the rest in the refrigerator. There

should be enough for a couple of days. Or you can freeze it if you'd prefer."

"Not cooking for two days sounds like bliss." She smiled at him, and he felt it right in his groin. He'd been as good as his word in the shower, only touching her to hold her up and wash her hair, his fingers gently massaging the suds into her curls, then helping her back beneath the spray to rinse it out. It hadn't stopped him from looking, at her lithe, tight body. Or from wanting to feel his fingers sliding against her damp skin.

Damn it, she was sick. And so was he for wanting her.

She yawned, her head slumping to the side. "Let me help you up to bed," he murmured, standing to put the dishes into the sink. He'd wash them once she was asleep and then let himself out. He hadn't warned Aunt Gina he was coming, but he knew he'd be welcome in his family home anyway. And tomorrow he'd fly back to Boston and get on with his work.

He knew he was a fool for coming here tonight, yet as soon as he'd gotten her message in the departure lounge he knew he had to see her. The thought of going another month – or longer – without hearing her soft laugh, or running his fingers through her curls made his chest feel tight. She'd sounded so damn ill on the message, and he hated the thought of her all alone in her cottage without anybody to take care of her.

They were friends, after all. And friends took care of each other. That was all he was doing.

"Come on." He hooked his hand around her waist and helped her stand. She slumped against him, and he tightened his hold. The stairs to her bedroom were steep, but he'd carried her up there before. That crazy day when they'd first met and his hormones had gone into overload, like a teenager unable to think of anything but his dick.

She looped her arms around his neck and nestled her face into him. He could feel the warmth of her breath through the open buttons at the neck of his shirt, as he carried her up the stairs and into her bedroom. Her eyes were drooping as he lay her on the mattress, before he pulled the covers up over her

body. "I'll grab your toothbrush," he told her. "You can give them a quick scrub in here. Then I'll go and let you sleep."

"You're leaving?" she asked.

"I'll get my rest at my dad's place, then fly back to Boston tomorrow."

She swallowed hard. "I thought you might stay here tonight."

"Do you want me to?" he asked, his voice low.

Her gaze met his. "Yeah," she breathed. "I do."

Crazy how that simple answer made his heart hammer against his chest. "Then I'll stay."

She smiled. "Good."

He helped her brush her teeth, before brushing his own. Then he took his shirt and pants off, neatly folding them up on the chair in the corner of her room. Wearing only his shorts, he climbed into bed beside her, trying really damn hard not to get aroused by her sweet body.

She curled into him, her dark tresses tickling his face as he pressed against her fragrant hair. A glance at his watch told him it was just past nine o'clock.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd gone to bed this early. Not without having sex, at least. And yet here he was, primetime on a Friday night, with a beautiful, feverish, woman, breathing softly against his chest.

If his brothers could see him right now they'd be sniggering their damn heads off.

It was a good thing his relationship with Courtney was a secret only the two of them knew.

---

THERE WAS something warm and damp beneath Courtney's cheek. It took a moment for her to realize it was Logan's chest,

and she'd somehow been drooling on it. She tried to softly wipe the saliva away from his skin.

“Huh?” Logan lifted his head. In the darkness of the room, she could just about make out his features. He was frowning as he looked down at her, his eyelids half-closed. “You okay? You need something?” he asked, his voice raspy.

Strangely, she was feeling a little better. Enough for her head not to be pounding anymore. “What time is it?” she asked.

Logan lifted his arm, the face of his watch catching a glint of the moonlight. “Almost eleven.”

“I thought it must be nearly morning.”

He brushed a curl from her cheek. “You’ve got a while yet. Go back to sleep.”

She let her head fall back onto his chest. God, he felt good. His skin was warm, taut over the rise and dip of his muscles, smelling of the soap they’d used when they were in the shower.

He stroked her hair again, and her thigh muscles contracted. She brought her hand up to his chest, splaying her fingers out across the ridge of his left pectoral. He let out a grunt, and her body tightened again. Tracing the lines of his chest with her hand, she turned her head and pressed her lips to his skin.

Almost immediately she felt him respond. He was hard and thick against her leg. She pressed her warm thigh against him until he sighed again.

“Baby, you’re sick,” he said, his voice low.

She lifted her head to catch his gaze. “I’m feeling better.”

He chuckled. “You’re still hot.”

This time she grinned. “I sure am.” She wriggled on the mattress until her face was inline with his, her body still pressed against his chest and legs. She traced her finger along his bottom lip, swallowing hard when she saw him tremble.

“We shouldn’t...”

“We should,” she whispered. “Like this. Easy and slow.” They were facing each other, laying on their sides, and she ran her hand down his spine, biting down a smile as he shivered.

Her body ached for him. The thought of going another month without feeling him move inside of her was too much. She watched as his brow dipped, as though he was thinking things through. She smoothed the three vertical lines between them.

Then she kissed him, her lips barely brushing his. He let out a little moan, giving into the need pulsing through both their veins.

“Just slow,” he whispered against her mouth, making it curl into a grin.

“Okay.” She nodded, her expression teasing.

He ran his hand down her side, then hitched her thigh over his hip, pulling her against him until they were lined up perfectly. He kissed her, gently sliding into her until their bodies became one. His eyes caught hers, and she gave a nod, then he started to move inside her.

Her body felt like it was on fire, every nerve ending tingling. He slid his hand down to her behind, fingers steadying her as he filled her over and again.

It was so different to the other times they’d had sex. So soft and intimate. Like he could see into her soul as the pleasure slowly coiled inside her. And when she came, it wasn’t the short, sharp blast of orgasms he’d wrung from her the last time they were together. It was sweet and long and made her breath catch in her throat. Soon after, he was joining her, holding her tight as he surged inside her, his hands caressing the cheeks of her behind as they both slowly came down from their high.

And then they heard the hammering on her front door.



## CHAPTER SEVEN



Logan frowned as Courtney froze in his arms, her body still pressed to his.

“Who’s that?” he asked her. Her body was stiff. Had he been wrong to give in to her?

“I don’t know.” Courtney was starting to shake. “Did you lock the door before we came up? I can’t remember.”

He nodded. “I slid the bolt shut.”

She squeezed her eyes shut. “Thank god.”

The knocking stopped, but then her phone began to ring. She picked it up from the nightstand. The screen was angled so he couldn’t read it, but from the expression on her face the call was unwanted.

“It’s Carl.” Her voice was thin.

“Who’s Carl?” He blinked.

Her eyes were wide as they met his gaze. “My brother-in-law.”

“That’s him banging on the front door?”

She nodded, her mouth quivering. “I think so. I should take this.” She slid her finger against the screen, then lifted the phone to her ear. “Hello?”

“Court, it’s me. You okay? I saw a car outside your house and got worried.”

Logan could hear the deep voice reverberate from her phone. He swallowed hard, waiting for her response.

“I’m fine.” Her eyes darted back and forth. “That’s Lainey’s car. She dropped something off earlier and left it here.”

“It doesn’t look like Lainey’s car.”

“It doesn’t?” Her whole body was trembling now. Logan stroked her hair, trying to calm her down, but she felt feverish all over again. “Um, maybe she borrowed it.”

Logan wanted to take the phone from her ear and tell this Carl guy to give Courtney a break. She was sick, for God’s sake.

*Yeah, so sick you just had your way with her. You’re no better.*

“Are you sure you’re okay?” The deep voice reverberated through the phone. “I can come in and sit with you for a while. I just got off shift.”

“There’s no need,” Courtney blurted. “I’m fine. Just tired. I’m going to get some more sleep and hopefully be better in the morning.”

“Okay. And I’m glad you locked your door. You don’t know who’s out there. Sleep tight, Courtney. I’ll call you in the morning.”

“Thanks.” She swallowed hard and ended the call, her frightened eyes meeting Logan’s again. “I’m such a bad liar. Do you think he knows?” She started scrolling through her phone. “I should call Lainey. Oh god, I have to ask her to lie for me.” Her breath caught in her throat. “What if he runs the plates? He’ll know you’re here.”

“It’s a rental. That’s all he’ll get.” Logan’s voice was soft. “And you can call Lainey in the morning. Is she a friend of yours?”

Courtney let out a mouthful of air. “My best friend.”

Something else he didn’t know about her. But then again, what did he know? It wasn’t as though they’d shared every

deep and dark aspect of each other's life. This wasn't about that. It was about sex.

"What if he comes back?" Courtney whispered. "What if he finds out you're here with me?" She squeezed her eyes shut. "Oh god, this is so bad."

Logan stared at her for a moment, trying to work out how to make this right. "Do you want me to leave?"

She shook her head. "No, he could still be outside."

Logan brushed his fingers over her cheek. "I'm not scared of him, if that's what you're worried about. And I can't figure out why you are either. I know he's your brother-in-law, but what we're doing here isn't wrong. You're not married and nor am I. We're not cheating. We're not breaking the law. We're two adults consenting to sex."

"But it'll hurt him, don't you see? And his parents if they find out. And for what? A hook up?" She tugged at the sheet, pulling it up to cover her chest. "Is it worth hurting people just for that?"

Logan blinked, trying to find the right answer. "We both agreed that was all it was..."

"I know we did." She let out a mouthful of air. "And it worked. It made me feel alive again. But I can't hurt the people I love, Logan. Not after everything they've been through."

"Do you want me to leave?" And damn if that didn't feel like a kick in the gut. She opened her mouth, then closed it again, her brows knitting together.

"It's okay," he said softly. "I get it. We weren't looking for complications. I shouldn't have come, at least not when you asked me not to."

"It was really sweet that you cared for me." She gave him a half-smile.

His chest clenched. Because he *had* wanted to care for her. But that wasn't what she'd wanted. How had he read it so wrong? For a moment when they were making love he'd

wondered if they could somehow make this work. Because she'd felt like everything right then.

Damn, he was being an ass. Of course they couldn't make it work. She was country and he was city. There was no way she'd ever come to Boston, and he'd never ask her to. He'd only let her down, the same way he always did.

*You're never home when I need you.*

*I called all night and you never picked up.*

*Why can't you love me the way you love your damn restaurants?*

He'd heard all that and more. And they'd been right, every one of them. He'd had enough therapy to know he was simply bad at relationships. Hadn't had one yet that ended in a good way.

And it looked like this one was going in exactly the same direction.

So why did his heart feel like it was being squeezed by a vice grip?

"I'll leave for the airport at sun up," he told her, pressing his lips together. "Maybe we should just... I don't know... let this go. I don't want to cause you any more pain." His chest felt heavy, making it harder to breathe.

"You think we should end it?" Her eyes looked glassy.

"Don't you?"

Her bottom lip trembled. "I guess... if you think we should. It's not as though we could ever be anything more than friends." She glanced up at him. "Right?"

"Right." He nodded firmly.

Her gaze dipped again. Shit, it was getting hard to breathe. Like his chest was full of whatever sickness she had. Why the hell couldn't he do this right?

She turned on her side and grabbed a tissue from the side table. "Sorry, I need to blow my nose." She blew loudly, then took a long, deep breath. "You're right. We're risking too

much and for what? Sex?” Her shoulders shook, as though she was laughing. He wasn’t sure whether he was glad he couldn’t see her face or not. All he knew was that the pain in his chest wasn’t going away. Instead, it kept getting tighter and tighter.

The sound of an engine starting up rumbled through the room, the loud hum decreasing as the car drove away.

“I guess he’s gone,” Logan said, his eyes trained on her bare back. Her shoulders were hunched, her two wing-like blades prominent through her lustrous skin. “Maybe I should go, too. In case he comes back.”

She nodded, her hair moving up and down. “Yeah, you probably should.”

---

THE SHIVERS she’d thought had gone thanks to Logan’s chicken soup and hot shower returned tenfold as soon as he left her bedroom. Courtney’s body trembled beneath the blankets as she heard the front door slam shut, then a few moments later the roar of his rental car. A sob escaped from her lips, and she put her hand over her mouth to stifle the sound even though there was nobody there to hear it.

There was nobody here at all except for her. And there wouldn’t ever be. She was all alone. Again.

Hot tears rolled down her already-heated cheeks, pooling at her chin before dropping to the mattress. She’d been such a fool. For a moment there, she’d hoped he’d contradict her. Tell her this was more than a hook up for him. That he’d begun to fall for her the way she was falling for him. But instead he’d walked away.

She should be grateful for his honesty. She knew that. And for the fact he had enough sense to know this was going nowhere. It couldn’t. There was no way she was ready to start another relationship. No way she could tell Ellis and Mary – or Carl – that she was replacing Shaun with a suave restaurant executive who lived in Boston.

She owed them more than that. All of them.

She rolled onto her back, wiping the tears away with the back of her hand, then grabbed her phone, quickly scrolling down her contacts until she reached Lainey's name.

***Can you come over in the morning? I need your help.***

She sent the message quickly. Three little dots appeared on the screen, telling her Lainey was awake and replying.

***Sure. Is everything okay?***

Courtney slid her fingers across the keyboard, quickly tapping out a response.

***Not really. But it will be. I just really need my best friend tomorrow.***

Lainey's answer came back quickly.

***You've got me, babe. I'll be over first thing in the morning. I'll bring us some pancakes. xx***

Courtney blinked back the fresh tears that sprung to her eyes. It was okay. Or it would be. She'd gotten through so many worse things than this. She'd tell Lainey about it, they'd eat all the pancakes, and somehow life would go back to normal.

Without him, and the way he made her feel.

She put her phone back on the bedside table, knowing he wouldn't message her when he arrived at the airport, nor when he got back to Boston.

The fact was, he wouldn't be messaging her again.

Somehow, her heart would have to get used to that.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT



### SIX WEEKS LATER.

COURTNEY RUSHED across the town square, zipping her padded jacket up and nestling her face into the silver scarf she'd wrapped around her neck. The air had turned cold in the past few days, making her cheeks turn pink and her breath opaque. It was a little over a week until Thanksgiving would be here, and the shops had already started to decorate their windows for the holidays. Red tinsel was strung across the window of Murphy's Diner, sparkling silver bells hanging from it. On the wall outside was a poster for the Chaplin Drive-In Theater's Holiday season, starting with *It's A Wonderful Life* on the first of December.

She used to love this time of year. As a child, their Christmas countdown had always begun on the Friday after Thanksgiving, when she and her mom would pull out the three huge boxes of decorations stacked in the garage, and together they'd decide on that year's theme. For the past two years, she hadn't even bothered to decorate her little cottage. There didn't seem much point when she was there alone.

She tightened her hold on her oversized purse, her mind drawn to the brown paper bag nestled inside. It had been in there unopened for two days. Ever since she'd had the gumption to drive to Maple Cross and walk into the drugstore, hoping nobody would recognize her in the town across from Hartson's Creek.

It had been more than a month since she'd heard from Logan Hartson. To her surprise, he'd messaged her when he returned to Boston, just to check she was feeling better. She'd replied that she was much better and that had been that.

No more words. No more messages. No more frantic visits on a night where time seemed to disappear and only desire mattered. He was gone for good, and that was exactly how it should be.

Didn't matter that it felt like she didn't quite fit into her skin anymore. It was for the best, anybody could see that.

Or it was, until she'd missed her second period.

The first one she hadn't noticed. It was a couple of weeks after he'd left her that night and she still wasn't thinking properly. It had been difficult enough to put on a normal face for Ellis and Mary, and smile politely at Carl whenever he visited them for dinner.

But then she'd missed her second period last week and that's when she started panicking. With her being sick, she wasn't sure whether she'd taken her pill the weekend that Logan visited.

The fact was, she couldn't remember. Her skin prickled at the thought of it. How could she be so stupid? They'd always doubled up on contraception, but this time, they'd failed completely.

She walked into the *I Can Make You Beautiful* salon, the bell ringing over her head. Lainey looked up from the desk where she had the phone jammed under her chin and her laptop open.

"You got it?"

Courtney nodded.

"Ladies," Lainey announced loudly to her co-workers, hanging up the phone and walking around the desk. "We'll be in my office if you need me."

"You don't have an office," Courtney said, frowning.



Lainey grabbed Courtney's hand, dragging her to the restrooms at the back of the shop. Once they were inside, she slid the bolt firmly closed and held her hand out. "Gimme."

Courtney opened her purse and pulled the brown bag out, passing the rectangular carton to Lainey. Her friend turned it over, squinting as she read the words, before she opened it up and pulled the wand out.

"Okay, you need to pee on this."

Courtney let out a deep breath. Maybe she should have gone home and done this in the privacy of her cottage, but the thought of being alone when she got the result made her want to hurl.

Everything made her want to hurl. Dear God, was she really pregnant?

She took the stick from Lainey and turned it over in her hand.

"Come on, just go and do it. You need to know either way." Lainey gave her a small smile.

Yeah she did. But the self-preservation part of her wanted to hide and pretend none of this was happening. There weren't many reasons why you missed two periods and felt nauseous in the morning.

"Go on." Lainey made a shooing movement with her hands. "Go tinkle."

Three minutes later they were staring at the words in the window at the center of the test.

*Pregnant.*

"Okay then," Lainey said, her voice less sure than before. "So now we know."

Courtney nodded, her eyes wide. "Yeah, we do." She slumped against the pink tiled wall of the bathroom and let out a sigh. "I'm having a baby."

Lainey's face lit up. "Oh my god, you are! You're having a cute little baby." She started to jump up and down. "This is

amazing.”

There was a rap of knuckles on the bathroom door. Lainey sighed and slid the bolt, pulling the door open. “What?” she asked abruptly. “Unless you’re about to piss your pants, maybe you could give us a minute?”

“Um, your twelve o’clock appointment has arrived,” Nicole told her.

“Can you be a darling and offer her a cup of coffee? I’ll be right there,” Lainey asked, her voice sugary sweet.

“Sure.”

Lainey closed the door behind her and whispered. “It’s Della Thorsen.”

“Who’s Della Thorsen?”

“My next appointment. She’s the town gossip. If I keep her waiting she’ll know something’s up. Her nose is more sensitive than a blood hound.”

“It’s okay. You go and tend to her.” Courtney attempted a smile, but her lips weren’t playing ball. “I’m going to grab a coffee from Murphy’s and sit in the square. To think.”

“Best make it decaf,” Lainey pointed out. “Better for the baby.”

*The baby.* There were those two words again. Ones she never thought would apply to her. A tiny living human was growing in her stomach, and she had no idea what to do with that thought.

“And I’m coming around tonight. We need a plan of action.” Lainey hugged her tight. “You’re having a baby,” she said again, squealing.

Courtney grimaced. “Say it louder, Della might hear you.”

Lainey grinned and planted a huge kiss in the center of Courtney’s cheek. “Don’t worry, Mama, your secret’s safe with me.”

---

AS IT TURNED OUT, Murphy's decaf tasted like crap. Courtney held the cup close in her palms to keep them warm as she sat on the white painted bench in the middle of the town square. In a couple of weeks there would be lights weaved through the bare branches of the oak trees, and the columns holding up the roof of the bandstand would be wrapped in red, to look like real life candy canes. All ready for Hartson's Creek's holiday celebration.

Shaun never had much time for Christmas when he was alive. As a farmer, he didn't even take the whole day off. There were always animals to feed and repairs to do in the morning. They'd usually go to Ellis and Mary's for lunch, exchange their presents, and maybe fall asleep in front of some old family movie on their old television. Then they'd go home and Shaun would shower and sleep while Courtney called her dad and stepmom to exchange holiday wishes.

For the past two Christmases she'd done the same, only Shaun hadn't been there. Mary would still try to make their farmhouse look festive, and roast a ham so big they'd be eating leftovers into January. But it had felt like they were each playing a part that didn't suit them. She couldn't wait to get home and climb into bed to count the hours until the holidays were over.

She took a sip of the disgusting coffee and winced. She'd be over three months pregnant by Christmas. Would she be showing by then? Would they be able to tell she was hiding something just by looking at her face?

How about Carl? What would he think?

Her heart started hammering in her ribcage. How the heck had she gotten herself into this?

Because she'd had unprotected sex with a hot guy. She of all people should understand the birds and the bees. She'd seen enough animals through pregnancy to know exactly how procreation worked.

*She'd have to tell Logan.* Just thinking his name made her breath catch in her throat. How the hell was she going to let him know? Send him a text?

It would go something like, *Hey, remember that night we had sex when I was ill? Surprise! We're having a baby.*

She groaned at the thought of it. Would he think she was trying to trap him? Or that she wanted to reconnect?

And Ellis and Mary. How would they feel, knowing she'd been with a man other than Shaun? As for Carl... the thought of him knowing made her shudder.

"Are you okay? It's a little cold to be sitting and admiring the view today."

Courtney looked up to see Sarah Maitland standing in front of her. The fifty-something lady had her grey hair wound into a bun at the nape of her neck. She was wearing a bright red woolen coat that looked so festive it made Courtney's heart ache. As the wife of Reverend Maitland of the First Baptist Church, Sarah was a familiar face in Sunday Service. Courtney could remember her visiting the cottage with Reverend Maitland two days after Shaun had died. Her words had been gentle and kind.

"I was just a little caught in my thoughts," Courtney said, looking up. "I'm hoping the cool air might help."

Sarah sat down on the bench, smoothing her coat beneath her. "I imagine this time of year is hard on you. Not that any time is easy when you've lost a loved one."

*Sarah thought she was thinking about Shaun?* If only she knew. "It's not so bad," Courtney said, tipping her head to the side. "At least things are a little quieter at the farm this time of year. Plus we all have our health. There's a lot to be thankful for."

"It doesn't always work that way though, does it?" Sarah asked softly. "Things like Thanksgiving and Christmas aren't just reminders of the passing seasons, they're reminders of what we have and what we've lost. Little pegs in the grounds

of our lives.” She turned her head to catch Courtney’s gaze. “You look pale. Are you sure you’re okay?”

Courtney smiled grimly. “I’m fine. Just thinking about how to tell somebody something they don’t want to hear.”

Sarah laughed. “That one’s never easy. And nobody ever handles it the same way. I’ve known people to dance around the truth for months. Years, even. And others to blurt things out before they’ve thought through the consequences.”

“Maybe there’s a middle way,” Courtney murmured.

“There usually is,” Sarah agreed. “But what I find the best way of all is to mix truth with empathy. Give them the space to digest what you’ve shared. Understand that their first response might not be their final one. But always know that the truth is what’s important. That’s the light that will see you through.”

She made it sound so simple. But right now the truth felt like a weapon. One that would stab Ellis and Mary in the heart, and explode its way through Logan’s life. As for her? Right now the truth felt like a burden. One that weighed heavily on her soul.

“There’s one other thing to remember,” Sarah said, taking Courtney’s hand and folding it in her own. “You have a right to have a life. And a good one, too. You’ve gone through something no young woman should have to go through. You’ve lost the man who was supposed to be by your side forever. But that doesn’t mean you have to mourn him for the rest of your life.” She smiled and it lit up her face. “You deserve happiness, Courtney. You’re a lovely, beautiful woman. Any man would be lucky to have you by his side. So if you’re sitting here worried about that, please don’t. God wants you to be happy, and I do, too.”

Tears prickled at Courtney’s eyes. Sarah’s words sounded so full of hope. And that’s what she wanted. Hope. A future. The light that would lead the way.

Is that what this baby was? Something hopeful? She glanced down at her still-flat stomach, covered with the padding of her coat.

Whatever happened, this baby was hers. He or she needed her. And she'd take care of it the way she'd taken care of everything else in her life. With a strong, fierce love that didn't let the darkness in.

For the first time all day, a genuine smile pulled at her lips. She was having a baby. A new life. It wasn't the way she'd envisioned becoming a mother. And she knew there would be so many obstacles along the way. But she was strong. She had a home and a job and she knew she could take care of this tiny little thing growing inside her.

She'd been alone for two years. She'd learned how to stand on her own two feet. She could run a farm, take care of her in-laws, and manage accounts that teetered ominously between black and red.

If she could do all that alone, then she could do this alone, too.

She took a deep breath and stood, turning to Sarah with that smile still on her face. "You're right," she said. "Maybe it's time to make my own happiness."

Sarah grinned. "It really is. And if you ever need anything, you know where I am. God welcomes everybody into his home. You don't have to be perfect, because nobody is. You just have to be ready to love."

And she *was* ready to love. Courtney knew that. Maybe that was enough for now.

## CHAPTER NINE



“So how’s it going?” Cam asked Logan as he slid a pint glass of water onto the table in front of his twin. Not needing to keep in peak condition, Logan had bought a beer for himself. It was a rare day when Cam wasn’t playing a game or at practice, and they’d arranged to meet up for a drink near his home.

“It’s good.” Logan lifted the beer to his lips and swallowed a mouthful, lifting his brows at his mirror-image sitting in the chair opposite. Logan missed seeing his brother, but this time of year was crazy for them both. It had been at least a month since they’d last met up. “I saw your game on Sunday. That play you made was amazing.”

Cam shrugged, taking a sip of the water. “The other team was crap. Aunt Gina could have won against them.” He turned to the left as a fan walked up and asked for a selfie, the corner of his lip lifting into a half-grin as the man hunkered down and angled the phone toward them. “Hey,” he said. “Can you do me a favor and post it once we’re gone? I haven’t had a chance to talk to my brother for a while and I’d like to keep it here on the down low.”

“Sure.” The fan nodded rapidly, his face glowing as if Cam had just shared a deep secret with him.

“Thanks, man.” Cam shook his hand, then pulled his attention back to Logan as the man left. “So how’s the restaurant coming along? You got a completion date yet?”

“January twenty-third as long as we pass the inspection.”

“Man, that sucks. I know you were hoping to get it opened before Christmas.”

Logan shrugged. He’d long since come to terms with losing out on the lucrative holiday income. They’d been stuck in the seventh circle of zoning board hell for weeks. “Ah, it gives us more time to make everything perfect. Opening in December would be a nightmare. Half the people we’d want to invite for opening would be busy, and hiring staff at this short notice would be almost impossible.” He swallowed another mouthful of beer. “You think you’ll be around for opening night?”

“I’ll get my PA to check my schedule, but if I can be there I will.” Cam lifted an eyebrow. “Speaking of which, I got an earful from Aunt Gina yesterday about how I never come home for a visit. She thinks I should be more like you.” He shook his head. “Could you stop making me look bad, please?”

“Hey, I haven’t been home for weeks.” Logan lifted his hands up. He hadn’t wanted to go back to Hartson’s Creek at all. Not since he’d headed straight to the airport from Courtney’s cottage early that Sunday morning. Next week would be his first visit to his dad’s in a couple of months. He’d already told Aunt Gina that he couldn’t make it for Thanksgiving itself. His restaurants would be too busy for him not to be on hand to help. But by Friday they would be calm. At least until the holiday rush started up a few days later.

“Yeah, but you’ll be there and I won’t. Which makes me asshole of the year.” Cam sighed. “I asked why they didn’t come up here for Thanksgiving. I’d get you all tickets to the game.”

Logan laughed. “I can’t imagine Aunt Gina having Thanksgiving anywhere but Hartson’s Creek.”

“That’s exactly what she said.” Cam sighed. “Apparently, I’m also trying to destroy family tradition.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I can’t fly in until Friday. So I’ll be missing Thanksgiving, too.”



“But you’re going home for the weekend,” Cam pointed out. “Which is gonna make her very happy.” He raised his voice into a falsetto. “I just want all my boys home with me.”

Logan laughed at his pitiful impersonation of their aunt. “I’ll put in a good word for you when I’m there next week,” he promised. His mouth felt dry at the thought of going home. In his head, he knew the likelihood of seeing Courtney was low. The Hartson family was spending most of the weekend at Gray’s house, a family reunion of kinds, though of course Cam wouldn’t be there.

But it didn’t stop him from missing her.

“You think you’ll be going back home more often now that the restaurant’s coming together?” Cam asked him.

Logan’s brows dipped. “No. Why?”

Cam shrugged. “A few months ago it felt like you were there all the time. I started wondering if you were thinking about abandoning me and moving back. I figured you just got too busy recently to make it home.”

Truth was, Logan *had* been busy. Frantic meetings with the zoning board, daily updates with the construction team, and all those conversations with his accountant, shifting money around to make sure they could pay for the damn thing. He’d welcomed the distraction. Keeping himself occupied meant he didn’t have to think about her. At least not until he collapsed into bed at night and felt that weird ache in his chest which hadn’t left him for nearly two months.

Sexual frustration. That’s all it was. Since he’d left her in bed that morning, he hadn’t been with anybody else. Didn’t have the time even if he wanted to.

But the truth was he hadn’t wanted to. Courtney was just another example of how he messed up relationships. He couldn’t even hold down a casual hook up without balling it up.

He’d been an idiot going to cook for her. As soon as he’d heard she was sick, he’d hatched a plan like some kind of

overexcited puppy. Cook for her, make her feel safe, then go to Aunt Gina's to rest.

And that's what he should have done, because going to bed with her had turned everything upside down. It had felt different when he'd held her, when he'd moved inside her, their eyes trained on each other like neither one of them ever wanted to let go.

It was as though he'd let a piece of him be exposed, only to have it stabbed by a knife over and over again.

He was a complication she didn't need. When it came to her life, her husband's family came first. He understood that. That's how he'd been brought up after all. Family over everything.

Yet, for a moment he'd let himself wonder... And it was the wondering that killed him.

“Earth to Logan.”

He pulled himself out of his thoughts, his eyes meeting Cam's. “Sorry, man. I was thinking about work.”

“I guess that's my cue to get another round in. You want another beer?”

Logan ran the tip of his tongue along his lip. “I'll take a whiskey instead.”

“Hoo boy, you really are in a funk. Okay, one whiskey coming up.” Cam stood and pulled his cap a little lower over his brow. “And as much as I'd like to join you, I'll stick to the soft stuff. Coach will kill me if I have a hangover tomorrow.”

Whereas there was nobody to kill Logan for a hangover. Nobody that really gave a damn. Not even Paris, with her overabundant energy. He could do what he wanted, when he wanted, and occasionally with who he wanted.

Most of the time he liked that. But right now, it would be nice for somebody to care just a little.

Cam walked to the bar and Logan pulled his phone out to check his messages. Like always, he pulled up her contact and looked at their chat.

***I made it back to Boston. You doing okay? - L***

***Thanks for taking care of me yesterday. And for being so understanding. I guess this is goodbye, right?- C***

She'd sent it the morning he left. And it still felt like a bucket of water across the face.

***Yeah, he'd typed. I guess it is.- L***

But then he'd deleted it and closed the chat. Because he couldn't bring himself to say it.

He was about to close it down again when he saw three little dots appear. What the hell? He stared at the screen for a moment, his chest tight. And then a message appeared, making his breath catch in his throat.

***Sorry to contact you after all this time, but I was wondering if you'd be visiting home soon? I need to talk to you about something. - C***

He glanced up from the phone. Cam was still leaning on the counter, talking to the barman as he poured their drinks.

Just hearing from her after all these weeks made his stomach feel tight. Was there something wrong? Had that cop hurt her? And then that tiny piece of bittersweet hope.

Did she miss him?

***I'll be flying in next Friday. There until Sunday. - L***

Cam was paying now, putting his card against the little terminal the barman was holding out.

***Can we meet somewhere to talk?- C***

***You want me to come to yours? - L***

He was both intrigued and slightly pissed at her reply.

***No. Maybe we can meet at the bench by the creek. The one at the end of Church Road?- C***

That was weirdly specific.

***Sure. Does 7pm on Friday work?- L***

***7pm is great. Thanks. - C***

There were no more dots. No kisses. No goodbyes. Just an odd sensation in his chest and a whole bunch of questions floating around his head.

He'd be seeing her next week. And wasn't that a weird fucking thought?

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"IT'S DONE," Courtney said, putting her phone on the battered coffee table in front of her. "We're meeting next Friday at seven."

Lainey reached for her hand and squeezed it tight. "How are you feeling about it?"

Courtney blew out a mouthful of air, but her lungs still felt tight. "Nervous, I guess. Scared, even. It's real now." She looked up, her lips pressed together. "What if he's angry or thinks I'm trying to trap him?"

"Honey, he freely entered into sex with you. Half of the responsibility is his. And if he's an asshole, then you'll know. And you'll have done the right thing by telling him." Lainey gave her a tight smile. "I hate to say it, but you two are going to be connected by this baby forever. Somehow you're going to have to get along. And I know you will. You're good people, Court. Everybody loves you. You're honest, open, and you care a damn lot. If he thinks you're doing something underhanded then he can go to hell."

Courtney bit down a smile at her friend's vehemence. The word forever was bouncing around her brain. This was really happening. She was going to have a baby. A little person that would have a whole lot of relatives in Hartson's Creek.

The *wrong* relatives.

She tried to push that thought away, but it refused to move. She hadn't stopped thinking about Ellis and Mary – not to mention Carl – since she'd gotten home from taking the test. All she could think about was how shocked they'd be. How disappointed in her.

“Oh god. How the hell am I going to tell Ellis and Mary?” she asked Lainey.

“When were you thinking of telling them?” Lainey asked, her expression soft.

“I don’t know.” Courtney pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, trying to think it through. “Maybe I should wait until the first trimester is over. Isn’t that what people do?”

“That’s what some people do, yeah.” Lainey nodded. “I guess you’ll need to see a doctor, right?”

“I will. “ Courtney pulled up a page on her phone. “They run a prenatal clinic every week out of the medical building in town. They have a midwife as well as an obstetrician, which I like the sound of.”

“And if somebody sees you walking into the clinic, how long do you think it’ll take for word to get around?”

Courtney shifted uncomfortably. “About ten nano seconds.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “Oh lord, they’re going to know before I even walk out of the building, aren’t they?”

“The downsides of small town living.” Lainey sighed. “If the gossip doesn’t kill you, waiting for it will.”

“Do you think I should go out of town to find a doctor?” Courtney frowned. “I don’t know what they have in Maple Cross.”

Lainey shrugged. “Do you want to be driving miles for every appointment? Don’t you have to go weekly toward the end of pregnancy? That’s gonna be a heck of a lot of driving when your stomach is as big as a bowling ball.” Her voice lowered. “Maybe you should just tell them before anybody else does.”

Courtney rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hand. “You’re right. I should tell them next weekend.” She gave Lainey a half-smile. “Right after I tell Logan Hartson he’s about to become a daddy.”

Lainey started to laugh, then put her hand over her mouth. “Sorry, it’s just so crazy. Of all the people I know, you’re the

last one I thought would be pregnant.”

Lainey was right. This wasn't like Courtney at all. Yet, since she'd spoken with Sarah Maitland in the town square, it was as though something had changed inside her. Maybe it was acceptance. Or the fact she worked on a farm. Pregnancy and babies were part of the circle of life. It was happening whether she liked it or not.

She could either view this baby as a hindrance or as a little miracle. Something good that came from the darkest moment of her life. Babies were givers of hope, and the hope this little one brought was needed more than most.

She smiled at Lainey. “Well I am. So get used to it.”

Lainey laughed harder. “You're a momma bear in training. I love it.”

Courtney rubbed her stomach, liking that description. “Well this momma bear is absolutely exhausted. It's been a hell of a day and I'm on sheep duty in the morning.”

Lainey jumped up, gathering their empty mugs. “In that case, I'll wash these and leave.”

“I'll wash them.” Courtney held her hands out.

“Oh no. If you're momma bear, then I'm the fierce grizzly auntie. And this auntie says you need your beauty sleep. Now go to bed. I'll lock the door behind me.” She pulled her key ring from her purse. “I still have the key you gave me, remember?”

“I remember.” Courtney had given Lainey the key when she was at her lowest, right after Shaun's death. Too low to have the energy to open the door for her best friend. “And I'm glad you do.”

Lainey leaned forward to hug her, the mugs clashing together as her arms curled around Courtney's waist. “Now sleep tight, my friend. I promise everything is going to be all right. And you're going to be the best mom a little baby could want.”

“Thank you,” Courtney murmured, hugging her back. “This little chick already has the best auntie.”

“I’m so damn excited. I want to tell the world.” Lainey pulled back and made a zipping motion across her lips. “I won’t, of course.” She widened her eyes. “Even if it kills me to keep your secret.”

It was sweet how excited she was. Maybe Logan would feel the same way.

*Yeah, and maybe he wouldn’t.*

One way or the other, she only had a week to wait until she found out.

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## CHAPTER TEN



*A*fter picking up his rental car, Logan drove straight to the First Baptist Church, parking in the back lot. The blacktop was cracked, tiny green weeds growing up through the gaps, as though nature was still trying to win out against construction.

He'd messaged Gray earlier that day to say he'd be a little later than planned. His flight got in at five, and it was only an hour's drive from the airport, but there was no way he wanted to get to his brother's house then leave right away to meet Courtney.

Better to meet her first, find out what she wanted to say to him, then go and concentrate on his family. His chest was already tight at the thought of seeing her.

As he climbed out of the sleek black rental, the cool Virginia air wrapped around him like a lover. He'd gone to the airport straight from work, but the collar of his light blue shirt was unbuttoned, the sleeves pushed up to below his elbows.

Reaching into the car, he grabbed his jacket from the hook, shrugging it on. There was a breeze in the air, ruffling his short, dark hair, but apart from that it was one of those temperate fall days, where the sun hadn't quite accepted that winter was on its way.

It would be soon, though. There were storms predicted for next week, with possible snowfall. He should be safely back in Boston by then, thank god.



Logan walked down the narrow track that led to the creek. Surrounded by trees and overgrown hedges on both sides, it opened up at the end to a wide expanse of grass, the water edged with a concrete path that allowed exercisers and leisure seekers to walk alongside the creek for a mile or two. A little further down were the long green lawns of the oldest houses in town. In the spring and summer, that's where the townsfolk would meet every Friday night with coolers of sweet tea and home made lemonade, the adults sitting and gossiping while the children played flag football or dangled their spindly legs into the creek.

They called it *Chairs*, mostly because along with their refreshments, everybody brought their own chair to sit and talk. As the center of Hartson's Creek gossip, he couldn't help but feel glad that this Friday night happened to fall at the end of November, when nobody would be there.

Turning the corner, his eyes landed on Courtney, and his heart immediately gave a little lurch. She was sitting on the bench overlooking the creek, her dark brown curls tumbling over her shoulders.

He stepped on a twig, and her head whipped as the crackling sound broke through the silence. Her blue eyes met his, and his mouth turned dry. Seeing her in real life reminded him just how little his memories did her justice. He scanned her face, still wondering why she'd asked him to meet.

Closer up, she looked a little thinner than he'd remembered, but since he mostly saw her in the dark, he had no idea how true that was. But it was still her. With those piercing blue eyes and dark tumble of curls framing her pale white face.

She opened her mouth then closed it again.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"How was your flight?" she said at exactly the same time.

They both gave a little laugh, in embarrassment more than anything else. He walked around the bench and sat next to her. The creek was high at this time of year, the water bubbling

into white foam as it met a cluster of rocks in the center, then turning a clear blue again as it raced its way past the bank. “My flight was good,” he said, his voice soft as he shifted to look at her. “Are you okay?” he repeated. “You look a little tired.”

He’d had enough experience to know that telling a woman she was tired was treading a thin line. But she didn’t react negatively. Instead, she pressed her mouth together and nodded.

“There’s something I need to tell you,” she said, swallowing hard. “And I’m not sure you’re going to be happy about it.”

Logan frowned. “What is it?” he asked, shifting in his seat.

She took a deep breath, then rolled her shoulders back. “I should just get it over with, right?” She gave a little laugh, though there was no humor in her eyes. “So here it is. I’m pregnant. Ten weeks, if my calculations are right. And there’s been nobody else.” She blew out some air, her mouth forming a perfect ‘o’. “So yeah, it’s yours.” Looking down, she turned her hands over, scanning them as though they held all the answers.

Logan blinked, his mouth dropping open at the sudden onslaught of information. He felt as though he’d been kicked in the gut. “No,” he said, his voice thick. “That can’t be right.”

“Three pregnancy tests tell me otherwise.”

His body felt as light as air. As though it could rise up to the sky at any minute. His heart hammered in his chest like he’d just received a shot of adrenaline through his ribcage.

Courtney Roberts was pregnant.

And the baby was his.

“Shit.” He shook his head. “I’m sorry.” He wasn’t a damn ogre. He’d been brought up well enough to know that contraception was as much his responsibility as it was hers.

And that’s why he’d always been so damn vigilant about it.

“The night you were sick,” he said, realization washing over him. They’d made love in her bed unexpectedly.

“I think so. We didn’t use anything, did we?”

He tried to think, his mind searching through the images of her naked in his arms. Of the sound of her breaths, the smell of her skin. Had he grabbed a condom from his wallet the way he always did?

He couldn’t remember using anything.

“What do you plan to do about it?” he asked her, still mentally beating himself up at being so irresponsible and landing them both here.

“I’m keeping the baby,” she told him, her voice soft. “But I’m not expecting anything from you. I’m not trying to trap you.”

“I know that.” He frowned, because this was so messed up. “I didn’t think you were. I’m just trying to take this all in. I had no fucking idea.”

She nodded, giving him a tight smile. “It’s a lot to think about.”

“It sure is.” He felt like his entire body had been bitch slapped a hundred times.

“And if you want to leave to go think, I’m okay with that. I was blindsided, too. It took me hours to even take a second pregnancy test. But I’ve had some time to take it in. I’m kind of ahead of you.”

He shook his head. “I don’t need to go. I just need to...” He sighed. “I have questions.” So damn many. “Is it okay if I ask them?”

“Of course.” She nodded, her face open.

“When did you find out?”

She ran the tip of her finger along her lip. “Last week. A few days before I messaged you.”

“And you didn’t suspect before? You have to have missed at least two periods, right?” He tried hard to keep his voice

non-accusing. Because this wasn't her fault. If anybody was to blame, it was him.

She was sick when they made love. He had no excuse for forgetting to protect them both.

"I had a small bleed the first month. I assumed that was my period. And this time there was nothing. It took me a few days to even think about the possibility of being pregnant. As far as I knew, I'd had a period since we were last together." Her words were as soft as the clouds above them. "But then it still didn't come, and I had to drive to Maple Cross to buy a pregnancy test because I couldn't buy it in the drugstore in town."

"Because people would talk," he murmured.

"It's stupid, right? Because they're gonna talk like crazy now. As soon as they find out. Courtney Roberts is having a baby, even though her husband's cold in the ground. It's like an early Christmas gift for the town gossips."

A surge of anger washed over him. Because she was right. People would whisper behind her back. They'd watch her with raised eyebrows, and exchange glances with each other every time her belly got a little bigger.

"If anybody gives you a hard time they'll have me to answer to."

She arched an eyebrow at him.

"I mean it," he told her, his voice low. "You're having my baby. I'll take care of you." His eyes clashed with hers. "We should get married."

She barked out a laugh, and he felt like he'd been slapped.

"Oh god, that's so sweet," she told him. "But we already agreed a relationship between us would never work. You're in Boston, I'm here. And I can tell from the look of shock on your face that you never planned on having kids with me. So thank you for being gallant, but no. We really shouldn't get married."

He hated that she was right. Another man – *a better man* – wouldn't take no for an answer.

But he wasn't a better man. Never had been. He was selfish and single minded, as well as a damned workaholic. Exactly the kind of man no kid deserved to have as a father.

But this poor kid didn't have a choice.

“You need to know I'll do whatever it takes,” he told her, his expression serious. “I can pay for your medical care, buy things for the baby. Whatever you both need.”

“You don't need to make any promises now,” she said, her eyes as cool as the water in front of them. “We have months to sort everything out. You probably need to talk it through with somebody. I know I did. News like this takes some getting used to.”

His thoughts immediately turned to his brothers. Cam would be busy training. He'd probably buy Logan a pack of condoms and tell him to take better care next time.

As for Tanner, their younger brother, he was as clueless as Logan and Cam about kids. Though at least he could hold down a relationship, having married his childhood best friend.

Gray might be able to help. Their eldest brother was the proud father of twins himself. Logan thought back to when Presley and Marley were born. He'd visited the following weekend, marveling at their tiny little fingers and toes. And how they could make more noise than he'd believed humanly possible.

In a few months, he'd have one of those tiny human amplifiers of his own. He'd be a father. Responsible for another life, for the happiness not only of their baby but of Courtney as well.

For as long as she stayed single. And a woman like her wouldn't stay single for long. Not even with a baby. She was too beautiful, both inside and out. One day his kid would have a step father and he'd have to watch them play happy family. The thought of it made his hands curl into fists.

*Yeah, well she doesn't want to marry you. She made that perfectly clear.*

He felt like a computer being fed way too much information. The rainbow colored circle in his head kept spinning.

“Have you told many people?” he asked her.

“Just Lainey.” Her eyes caught his again. “She was there when I took the first test.”

“I wish I'd been there.” The words came without any thought. She blinked in surprise.

“You can come to the appointment I made for next week if you want,” she told him. “But I guess with you being in Boston it'll be hard.”

“I'll be there,” he said firmly. “When is it?”

“Next Thursday at two.”

He had an all day meeting on Thursday with the chef of their new restaurant. He and Paris were due to go through the menu, tasting every item, and approving what worked. She was going to be pissed.

“I'll fly back in on Thursday morning,” he told Courtney.

“You don't have to come to everything. I know how hard it'll be to try to juggle work and all this stuff.” She gestured at her stomach. “I can ask my friend to come with me.”

“No.” His voice was firm. “I want to be there for every appointment.”

“Let's talk about things like that later. It's not going to be easy with you in Boston. And that's before we even start talking about custody. I have absolutely no idea how people deal with having a child while living in different states.” She gave a little shiver, pulling her thin grey coat tightly across her. “It's getting cold.”

“I should let you go,” he said, doing everything he could to stop himself from reaching out to warm her up. “Before you get sick again.”

Her lips curled up. “Oh, I’ve been sick most days. Another little joy this baby brings.”

“Did you drive here?” he asked.

“Yeah, my car’s in the town square.”

He felt a flash of disappointment of not being able to drive her home. “I’ll walk you to it.”

“That’s not a good idea,” she told him. “Not yet. People will talk. But just so you know, I’m planning on telling my in-laws about the baby tomorrow. I figure once we go to the prenatal appointment everybody will know, and I’d rather they hear it from me first.”

“Do you mind if I tell my brother?” He needed to talk to somebody.

Her gaze was as soft as the clouds above them. “I don’t mind at all. This is your baby, too.” She went to stand, then lurched toward him, and he reached out to catch her. Half-standing, he wrapped his hands around her waist, steadying her against him.

And damn if she didn’t feel good in his arms. Her breath caught in her throat as she gazed up at him, eyes wide. The same way she’d stared at him that night when he’d slid inside her, and they’d made a baby neither of them agreed on.

His baby, now growing inside of her. His eyes immediately dipped to her stomach. It was covered by her coat.

But one day it would swell and grow to accommodate his child. How would he feel watching her like that? Part of him wanted to hide away. And the other? It wanted to grab her and run somewhere that he could keep them all safe. Protect them from the storm he knew this pregnancy would unleash in this town.

“Sorry. I keep getting dizzy.” She angled her head up at him, and for a moment all he could think about were those lips. Soft, warm, and welcoming. It would take only a second to dip his head and press his mouth against hers. Just a moment to taste her again.

And then he'd be fucked. Because everything about her was alluring. But she didn't want him, not like that. If she hadn't made that clear two months ago, she sure did today.

"I should go," he said quickly. He needed to get away from the floral aroma of her. To breathe fresh air again. "Are you sure I can't walk you to your car?"

"Not this time."

"Can I call you?" he asked.

"Of course. I guess we have things to talk about. And I'll see you on Thursday, right?"

"Yeah." Another mess he'd have to work through. "But I'll call you before that. Before I leave."

"You're going back to Boston in between?"

"I have to. I've got a lot going on."

She nodded. "I can imagine."

"But I'll call you tomorrow night. Once I've..."

"Got your head straight," she said, smiling.

He gave the smallest of laughs. "Something like that."

"Thank you for taking it so well. And being so kind. A lot of guys wouldn't."

The thought of it infuriated him. "You're the mother of my kid, Courtney. I'll do whatever is needed to take care of you both. We'll work this out." He sounded surer than he felt.

They started to walk toward the lane. Her eyes darted to the left, as though she was checking if anybody was there.

"My car's in the lot," he said, pointing at the cracked pavement at the back of the church.

He looked at her, the silence of the November evening curling around them like mist. Her eyes locked with his, and for a moment it felt like his heart had forgotten to beat.

"I'll see you later, Logan," she said, giving him a tight smile.



He nodded. "Drive safely." He didn't add that she had precious cargo to worry about.

Courtney smiled at him. "I always do."

She turned and started walking up the lane, her hips swinging, her dark curls bouncing with every movement. For a moment he watched her, desire shooting through him like it always did when he was near her.

He was going to have to work on that.

Letting out a long sigh, he walked back to his car, climbing into the driver's seat and pulling the door closed. Then he dropped his face to the wheel, his brow pressing against the soft leather, and let out a growl of frustration.

*Happy Thanksgiving. By the time the next one comes round, you'll be a daddy.*

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN



*S*he's pregnant. The words echoed around his head, hitting the sides like a pinball on acid. Logan sat in his car in the driveway outside Gray's sprawling ranch house, leaning his head back against the headrest, his eyes closed for a moment.

*Breathe.* He needed to breathe. There had to be some way to figure this out. That's what he did; took problems, twisted them around, and made them into opportunities. There was never an issue he couldn't solve.

Not with the business.

Not with his friends.

Even regarding his love life he'd figured out the problem with the help of his therapist. His problem was he couldn't give a woman what she wanted. So he'd learned to be up front. Not promise something he couldn't give.

Like being the father to a child who'd need all of his attention.

Lifting his head up, Logan yanked at the driver's side door and climbed out, rolling his neck to ease the knots in his muscles. The graveled pathway crunched beneath his feet as he walked up to the porch, stepping between the rows of pumpkins that Maddie must have laid out on the steps.

Pressing the doorbell, he inhaled a lungful of cool autumn air, but it did nothing to help regain his equilibrium.

Courtney was pregnant. The words echoed in his head again, starting off the whole chain reaction of tight jaw, shallow breaths, and aching chest.

“You made it.” Gray’s wife, Maddie, grinned as she opened the door, one of the twins on her hip as she stepped aside to let him in.

“Bro!” Tanner walked into the hallway, his face lighting up when he saw Logan standing there. Behind him was his wife, Van. The pretty blonde lifted her hand in a wave.

“Thank god you’re here,” Tanner said, pulling his brother into a hug. “Becca wants us all to go to Gray’s studio for another damn karaoke competition.” He wrapped Logan in an enthusiastic hug. “You’ll save me, won’t you?”

“No he won’t.” Becca joined them in the hallway, pushing Tanner aside so she could hug Logan. “Because he knows what’s good for him.” She looked up at Logan. “Hey, are you okay? You look really pale.”

“I’m fine.” Logan’s voice was gruff. “Just tired, is all.” He gave his sister a tight smile. “I don’t suppose I can go and freshen up, can I?”

Maddie nodded. “Oh, of course. We’ve got you in the guest room on the first floor. In the room next to ours.” Presley started to cry on her hip. Or was it Marley? Logan wasn’t completely certain. Whichever of his nephews it was, they were loud as hell. “The twins inherited Gray’s voice,” Maddie told him. “Neither one of them came with a volume control.” She turned her head to the side. “Gray, can you come and show Logan to his room? Presley needs a diaper change. He stinks.”

Gray walked into the hallway, holding Marley in one arm and a bottle of wine in the other. His face split into a smile when he saw Logan standing by the front door. “I didn’t realize you were here,” he said, passing the wine bottle to Becca and reaching to hug Logan with one arm. “Sorry, bro. Was topping up dad and Aunt Gina’s wine.” He glanced at Becca. “Dad’s fallen asleep three times already. Sis, you may regret agreeing to be their designated driver.”

“I always regret being the designated driver.” Becca sighed. “And yet somehow I always get suckered into it.”

Logan took another deep breath, trying to center himself. The hallway echoed with the chatter of his family as Maddie and Gray started talking about what time to put the twins to bed, and Becca, Tanner, and Van started to discuss the set up in Gray’s recording studio. Presley had stopped crying, and was now pulling at Marley’s shirt, as though trying to take it off.

This was home. This was real. This was his family. For the next two days, maybe he could ignore the ache that was pulling at his stomach, and pretend his meeting with Courtney hadn’t happened.

Gray and Maddie swapped babies, and Gray inclined his head at Logan. “Come with me,” he said, heading toward the bedrooms. Logan followed him, his overnight bag in his hands, biting down a smile at the way Presley was looking at him over Gray’s shoulder, his head bobbing up and down as they walked down the hallway.

Gray and Maddie’s kids were cute. Two little blond bombshells who were certain to be heartbreakers one day.

For a second, Logan wondered what his and Courtney’s baby would look like. If it was a girl, would she have Courtney’s dark curls and piercing blue eyes? Or would she look like a Hartson, with hair that grew darker as she aged.

His stomach twisted again as reality washed over him. That baby would grow up either way. Go from an infant to a toddler, then a child who’d learn to call him ‘Dad’. Maybe they’d look at him the way he’d seen Marley and Presley look at Gray. As though he was the king of the goddamned world.

Or maybe they’d look at him the way he saw his dad. As a disappointment. Somebody who was never there for him.

As the person who always let them down.

“This is your room,” Gray said opening the door to the guest room. Like the rest of the house, it was huge, with an oversized divan and expensive bedspread, the walls a soft gray, with a darker, thick carpet.

Logan nodded. “Thanks, man. I’ll just take a shower then come out and say hi to everybody. You need any help with dinner?”

“That’d be great.” Gray gave him a smile. “I have a feeling bedtime’s gonna be a battle tonight. Pres and Marl have been going crazy all day with all the attention they’ve been getting. They’re going to hate having to sleep.” He lifted an eyebrow. “I’ll tell ya, nobody ever prepares you to be a parent. It’s harder than anything I’ve ever done.”

Logan’s mouth turned dry. Presley started to grumble, arching his back to try to get out of Gray’s hold.

“You okay, man?” Gray asked. “You just went white as a sheet. You sure you’re not coming down with something?”

Logan opened his mouth to say he was fine, then closed it again, because fine was so far away from what he was feeling right now.

He was terrified. Confused. And already feeling like he’d failed before he even began.

“No,” he said, his voice rough. “I’m not.” He lifted his gaze to Gray’s, taking in the concern etched on his brother’s face. “Can we talk about it later?”

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“TAKE THIS.” Gray tossed him a bottle of beer, then pulled a cap off the other and took a long gulp. “Okay,” he said once he’d swallowed it down. “Spill. Who’s the lucky lady? Is it someone from the restaurant?”

The two of them were alone in the kitchen, loading the dishes into the huge stainless steel washer that wouldn’t look out of place in one of Logan’s restaurants. He’d helped Maddie and Gray design this kitchen, and had worked with his contacts in Boston to supply the best appliances money could buy. Maddie and Becca were bathing the twins before their bedtime, and Dad and Aunt Gina were in the living room, waiting for Becca to drive them home. Tanner and Van had left

after dinner. They had a week before the holiday season began at the drive-in they owned, and they needed to work in the morning.

Logan's brows knit together. "Why do you think it's someone from the restaurant?" he asked.

Gray made a face at him. "Because you're never anywhere else."

"Yeah, well Courtney lives about a mile away from here."

Gray blinked. "The mom's from Hartson's Creek?"

Logan nodded. "You know Creek Edge Farm? On Main?"

"Yeah, I know it." His eyes widened in recognition.

"I didn't know her until this year," Logan admitted. "We've only saw each other a few times, really." He leaned his arms on the counter, clasping his hands together. "We met by accident when one of her hens ran in front of my car. Then things got a little out of hand."

"Wow." Gray raked his hand through his hair. "I had no idea."

"Nobody did. It was a casual thing. She didn't want anything serious, and neither did I."

Gray chuckled. "Getting pregnant sounds pretty damn serious to me."

Logan sighed, staring out of the glass doors. Night had fallen, and the sky was dark. And he still hadn't gotten his head around what Courtney had told him. "It was an accident." He shook his head. "My fucking fault. I forgot to use a condom."

"You forgot?" Gray gave a low whistle. "Oh boy. It's not like forgetting to turn the light off or something. You only had one damn job."

Logan dropped his head into his hands. "I know. I fucked up. And I have no idea what to do about it."

Gray was silent for a moment. Logan swallowed hard, the reality of his situation pressing down on him like a dead

weight. “She’s having my baby,” he said, lifting his gaze to his brother’s. “I’m gonna be a dad and I’m not ready for it.”

“Nobody’s ready for it. I know I wasn’t.” Gray wiped his hands on a towel and took another mouthful of beer. “But really, that doesn’t matter because the baby’s coming whether you like it or not. So what are you gonna do?”

Logan blinked like a deer in headlights. “I’ve no idea.”

“It’s a long way between here and Boston,” Gray said, his voice even. “You planning on being a part-time dad?”

The question felt loaded. Logan lifted his hands up. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “My business is there. My baby is gonna be here. I have no fucking idea how to make this work.”

“How far along is she?”

“Ten weeks.”

The corner of Gray’s mouth quirked up. “Then you have around six and a half months to figure it all out.”

Six months. Damn. That didn’t feel like very long at all. “I’m gonna mess this up. The way I mess everything up.” He shook his head. “This poor kid is doomed from the start.”

Gray threw the towel at him. It brushed against Logan’s hair before landing on the floor. “Shut up,” Gray told him. “You’re not gonna mess it up. And you’re not gonna be a bad dad. Not unless you really work hard at failing.” He walked around the counter, and pulled out two stools, sitting on one and offering the other to Logan. “You’re gonna be there for your kid, right?”

Logan frowned. “Of course I am.” He was as surprised as Gray by the vehemence in his voice. “I mean, I’m going to fuck it up. We both know that. But I’ll try to be there anyway.”

“What about the mom? You said it was casual. Does that mean you’re not a thing?”

Logan shook his head. “I asked her to marry me. She said no.”

Gray started to laugh.

“What?” Logan asked, his jaw twitching.

“One minute you’re telling me you don’t know what to do, that this thing was casual. The next minute you’re saying you asked her to marry you. I’m getting whiplash, bro.”

“Join the club,” Logan muttered. “It felt like the right thing to do.” He swallowed. “She’s a widow. People are gonna talk. And it’s my fault she’s in this situation.”

“You can’t marry her because you feel guilty.”

“Yeah, well your point is moot, because she told me no.”

“She sounds like a wise woman.”

Logan swallowed, thinking of the way she’d looked as she’d walked away from him. Her hair tumbling over her back, her hips swinging. “She’s good people.”

“You told anybody else about the pregnancy?” Gray asked him.

“Just you. And I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell anybody else apart from Maddie.”

“Your secret is safe with us.” Gray propped his chin on his hand. “And just try to slow down for a minute, okay? Stop making grand gestures and really think about how you’re gonna make this work. You’re gonna be a dad, and it’s the most amazing, frightening, and overwhelming thing you’ll ever do.” Gray’s lips twitched. “Apart from falling in love.”

Logan finished his beer, putting the brown bottle back onto the counter, and let his head fall back until he was staring at the ceiling. It *was* overwhelming. And frightening. Amazing? Well that remained to be seen.

“You’re gonna be a good dad,” Gray told him. “I know you are.”

Logan tried to smile, but it came out as a grimace. Because they both knew Gray was lying. He was going to be shit at this relationship, the same way he was with all his others. Except this time, a little piece of him was gonna get hurt.



Yet, he wanted to try. Because that little baby growing inside Courtney Roberts was his. It had half his genes, half his history. And he owed it to that child to be the best father he could possibly be.

“Yeah, well I’m gonna do my best.”

Gray slapped his back. “Well, congratulations. This time next year, Pres and Marley will have a little cousin hanging around.” Gray grinned. “And if you’re lucky, there’ll only be one of them.”

“Twins?” Logan’s eyes widened. “Shit, no. No thank you.”

“Sorry to tell you, but you don’t get a choice about that either. Ask me how I know.”

“Yeah, well Cam and I thank you for taking one for the team. Two sets of twins is enough for any family.”

“I’ll keep my fingers crossed there’s just one heartbeat.”

“Are you trying to get my blood pressure up?” Logan asked him.

Gray grinned. “Nope. I think you’re doing just fine with that all on your own.”

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LATER THAT NIGHT, Logan lay in the guest room, tossing and turning in the strange bed as he fruitlessly tried to fall asleep.

Maybe this whole thing could actually work out.

Yeah, there were complications. He and Courtney would have to work out a custody schedule where the baby could spend time with him in Boston as well as here in Hartson’s Creek. But Logan thrived on solving complicated situations. It was how he’d built his restaurant empire. He saw them as problems to be solved, and there was always a solution, even if he had to search to find it.

This was no different.

Yeah, at first he'd felt afraid and completely out of whack. But that was because he hadn't expected anything like this at all. He'd never even considered having a family. Hadn't met the right woman.

But he *had* met Courtney. And maybe, *just maybe*, this was always meant to be.

He turned onto his side, his eyes closed as he remembered her pale face when she'd told him about her pregnancy. It had probably reflected his own. He'd felt anxious and scared, as though his life was being tipped on its head without his permission.

But now he felt more relaxed. Talking to Gray and being with his family had made him that way. And knowing that he was back in control of his life.

He'd make this work. And he'd be a better father than his own dad had ever been. After their mom died, their dad had barely paid them any attention. Too mired up in his own grief and hurt to realize his children were in pain, too. He was selfish in his grief, and he'd never recovered from the loss.

Thank god they'd had Aunt Gina to take care of them. His mother's sister had moved into the house as soon as she could, hugging and taking care of her nephews and niece the best way she could.

And that's how Logan knew that families didn't have to be perfect. They didn't have to be whole, even. A child just needed to be loved, taken care of. That was something he could do. Even at a distance.

If that meant spending more time with Courtney? He wasn't sure if that was a bonus or a penance. The blood shooting through his veins told him it was probably a bit of both.

## CHAPTER TWELVE



Courtney tossed and turned for most of that night. She wasn't sure if it was due to the pregnancy hormones surging through her veins, or the last vestiges of the adrenaline still making its way through her veins after telling Logan. By the time she'd fed the animals and prepared the cottage for the Roberts to join her for dinner, she was exhausted.

She'd asked them over to eat along with Carl, who'd been working on Thanksgiving day. It seemed like the perfect time to tell them all about her pregnancy.

Not that there was anything perfect about this.

Rolling her shoulders to brace herself, she carried the country ham she'd been baking all day to the table. It felt like it weighed a ton. Carl must have noticed, because he immediately stood and took the platter from her and placed it in the center, next to the mashed potatoes and carrots.

"Thank you."

"No problem. I was worried you were gonna drop it for a minute there." He grinned at her. "And I'm starving."

"This looks delicious, Courtney," Mary said, the corners of her eyes wrinkling. "And it smells wonderful."

"How about we all stop talking about how it looks and start tasting it?" Ellis suggested, leaning forward to carve a slice. "One slice or two, sweetheart?" he asked his wife.

"Just one."

“I’ll have two,” Carl said. “I haven’t eaten since this morning.”

Once the food was served, Carl lifted his glass of red wine. “We should have a toast,” he said. “To absent loved ones. My brother.”

“To Shaun,” Ellis lifted his glass, then Mary did, too.

All three of them gazed at Courtney. She hadn’t found the words to say no when Carl had poured wine into her glass. It wasn’t as though she needed to drive home, after all. And they all knew Cabernet Sauvignon was her favorite wine. She’d let it sit there, planning to pour it down the sink when nobody was looking.

“To Shaun,” she said, curling her fingers around the stem.

Thanksgiving had been his favorite holiday. He always said there was something so simple about it. Good food, family, and none of the gifts and overindulgence that Christmas seemed to bring. Just time to rest and to think about the past year.

“The ham is lovely, dear,” Mary said from across the table. “You really are a wonderful cook.”

“Thank you. It’s nice to have people to cook for.” Courtney smiled at her. “And I owed you one after you cooked on Thursday.”

“I’m glad we’re able to all celebrate together,” Ellis said, spooning more mashed potatoes onto his plate. “It’s a shame you couldn’t be with us on Thursday, son.”

“I tried to rearrange the roster.” Carl shrugged. “But you know what it’s like. Those with families get first pick of the holidays.”

“Maybe you’ll get first pick one day,” Mary said, smiling at him. “When you settle down with a wife and have some children.”

Courtney felt her cheeks flame up. She slowly looked up from her plate. Carl was staring right at her. His gaze was firm.

Intent. And it made her mouth go dry. She reached for her wine glass before she realized what she was doing.

And immediately pulled her hand away again.

“You’re not drinking,” Carl said. A statement, not a question. It made her fingers tremble.

“Oh, you should try it,” Mary said, taking another sip. “It’s delicious.”

Courtney glanced at the wine, then back at Carl. “I can’t drink,” she said, her voice low.

This was it. Time to tell them. Her breath caught in her throat.

“Why can’t you?” Carl asked.

She looked up at him. His brows were knitted together, his gaze set on her face. Mary was looking at her, too. Her expression was full of concern. Ellis was the only one still eating.

“I have some news,” Courtney said, trying to find the right words. “And I have no idea how to tell you this, but you need to know. I’m having a baby.”

Ellis dropped his fork, the metal clanging against the tiled floor.

“You’re pregnant?” Mary asked, her voice tremulous.

Courtney nodded. Her eyes stung as she met Mary’s confused stare. “I’m due in June. I don’t have an exact due date yet, but I will after I have my first appointment next week.”

“I don’t understand.” Mary shook her head. “Who’s the father? I didn’t know you were seeing anybody.”

“It’s not important,” Courtney said softly. She wasn’t ready for that bit yet.

Carl slammed his fist on the table, making the silverware clatter against the wood. Courtney’s wine sloshed over the side. “Of course it’s fucking important,” he said, standing, his

face stained red. “You’ve been fooling around with somebody and I want to know who it is.”

“Carl!” Mary looked up at him, her voice tremulous. “Be kind.”

“Who is he?” Carl’s jaw was tight.

Courtney curled her hands into fists beneath the table, resting them on her thighs. Ellis was staring down at his half-eaten plate, while Mary’s watery eyes were set on Courtney. Carl walked around the table, putting his hand on Courtney’s shoulder, making a shiver wrack down her spine.

“Who’s the father, Courtney?” he asked again.

“Stop asking her,” Ellis finally spoke. “It’s none of our business.”

Courtney shot him a grateful look.

“Of course it’s our business. She was married to my brother. *Your son*. She still lives in his house.” Carl blinked, tipping his head to the side. “The car I saw outside that time? Is it the father’s?”

“Sit down, Carl, and eat your dinner,” Mary urged. “You’re upsetting her.”

“I can’t sit down,” he said, his voice low. “And I can’t eat another damn thing.” He inhaled sharply. “I need to get out of here before I do something I’ll regret.”

Courtney reached for his arm, but he jerked it away. “Carl, this doesn’t mean I didn’t love Shaun.”

“You told me you weren’t over him.” His voice was sharp.

“I’m not.” She let out a ragged breath. “Or I wasn’t. I don’t know.” She wasn’t sure how she’d envisaged this going down, but this wasn’t it. “I’m sorry,” she said, her voice gentle. “I know this must be a shock for you all.”

“I imagine it was a shock for you, too,” Ellis said, his eyes sparkling. “Now are you sitting down, Carl, or are you going? Because I want to eat this ham.”

“I’m leaving.” Carl shrugged on the jacket he’d slung over the back of his kitchen chair.

“Please stay,” Courtney said to him. “I’d like us to enjoy dinner together.”

Carl shook his head. “You all go ahead and eat at my brother’s table, while the woman he loved is knocked up with another guy’s baby. But I can’t eat another damn thing.” He pulled his keys from his pocket, and stalked out of the kitchen and through the living area, wrenching the front door open. He didn’t look back as he stepped outside before he slammed it behind him.

Courtney slowly turned back to the table and folded her silverware on her plate. Well that went well.

“He’ll come around,” Mary told her. “It’s just a shock. That’s all.” She picked up her fork and scooped up some potato, lifting it to her mouth.

Ellis leaned over to grab his own fork, then wiped it on his napkin before cutting up another piece of ham. “This is really good,” he said, spearing it into his mouth. “You’re a fine cook, Courtney,” he said once he’d swallowed it down, giving her a toothy smile.

They were good people, her in-laws. She’d always felt lucky to have Ellis and Mary on her side. And Carl? Well he could be hot headed, but he was still grieving Shaun’s loss the way they all were.

“You should eat,” Mary said softly. “For the baby.” She reached across to squeeze Courtney’s hand. “There are two of you to think about now. And if I’m going to be this little one’s grandma then I get to take care of you both.”

Courtney smiled at her. “Thank you for being so understanding.”

“A baby is always happy news,” Mary said firmly. “*Always*. And Carl will agree, when he calms down.”

Ellis lifted his wine glass to his lips, winking at Courtney. “I’ll drink to that.”

---

“I HAVE this amazing new foot cream,” Lainey said as she and Courtney sat in the cottage the following evening. She’d been giving Courtney a pedicure, promising that it would relax her after yesterday’s encounter with her in-laws. “It’s supposed to make even rhino skin go smooth. Though I think it might have met its match with you.” She wrinkled her nose. “You need to take better care of your feet.”

Courtney wiggled her toes. “These are working feet. I stand on them almost twelve hours every day.” She swallowed a laugh as Lainey rubbed the cream into the soles. “Hey, that tickles.”

“I’m surprised you can feel anything through this thick skin.” Lainey shook her head. “I’m booking you for a weekly mani pedi starting next week. No arguments.”

“It’s pointless. I’ll just ruin it on the farm. And anyway, I’m busy.”

Lainey rested Courtney’s foot on her leg, her expression turning serious. “You need to start looking after yourself. For the baby’s sake. You can’t keep working long hours and expect everything to be okay. Have you even thought about when you take maternity leave? Who’s going to fill in for you? What will you do with the baby when you go back to work? You’ll be in the middle of your busiest season here on the farm.”

Courtney tipped her head to the side, her eyes on Lainey. “Have you been reading a pregnancy book?” she teased.

Lainey’s cheeks flushed. “No.” She pressed her lips together. “Okay, I’ve read a few websites. And they all say I’m right.”

It was impossible not to smile at her. “I only found out I was pregnant a week ago,” Courtney pointed out. “I haven’t got it all figured out yet. But I will. We can get some seasonal workers if we need to. And if all goes well, I should be able to get back out in the fields pretty soon, even if I have to baby wear or something.”



Courtney's phone started buzzing on the coffee table in front of them. She picked it up, lifting an eyebrow when she saw who was calling.

"It's Logan," she told Lainey.

"Take it." Lainey leaned in, intently. "Don't worry about me."

Courtney shook her head with a grin, then swiped her finger to accept the call. "Hello?"

"Hey. It's me." His voice was buttery smooth.

"How are you?" she asked, ignoring Lainey's wide-eyed stare.

"I'm good. More importantly, how are you? Did it go okay with your in-laws yesterday?"

Courtney let out a sigh. "It went as well as I expected. They were kind, but shocked. And Shaun's brother was pissed."

"The brother who nearly caught us that night?"

Courtney swallowed, remembering his warm, hard body against hers, as well as the total panic she had when she realized Carl was knocking at the front door. "Yeah, that one."

"Do you want me to talk to him? Smooth things over?"

"Good Lord, no." Courtney shook her head even though he couldn't see her. "That wouldn't go well. He needs some time and space to get used to the news. He and Shaun were really close. It must be difficult for him."

"I don't want him giving you a hard time. Not when you have our baby to think about."

Courtney blushed at his use of the word 'our'. Was that the first time he'd used it? Maybe it meant he was getting used to the idea. "Did you talk to your family?" she asked him, still wondering.

"Just my brother. Gray."

"The rock star."

He chuckled. "That's the one. I haven't told everyone else though. I figured there's plenty of time for that. Plus, I can't guarantee they won't blab all over town." He cleared his throat. "It was good to talk to him. Helped me sort through all these damn thoughts rushing around my brain."

"Everybody will know soon anyway. I've come to terms with that." Courtney watched as Lainey pulled out her bag of nail polishes, selecting a shiny vermillion one. She shook it and unscrewed the top, arranging Courtney's feet on the towel across her thighs so she could start to paint the nails.

"You know I'm gonna take care of you, right?" Logan's voice was low. "I'm here for whatever you need."

"That's very sweet, but I can take care of myself," Courtney told him. "But I'm glad you want to take care of the baby with me. I want him or her to know their father."

"You're the mother of my child, Court. I don't know how else to deal with this other than to be there for you. I want to be involved. The pregnancy, the birth, the whole thing."

Lainey stopped mid-brush, her lips curling up as she met Courtney's gaze. "Oh. My. God," she mouthed.

"Stop it," Courtney mouthed back. Then aloud, she said, "Thank you. That means a lot."

"I'm flying to Boston tonight," he told her. "But I'll be back for your appointment on Thursday. Can I pick you up? Give you a ride there?"

She caught Lainey's gaze again, thinking of how much of a statement that would make. Arriving together in the town square and walking into the doctor's office together. Even if people didn't figure it out right away, it wouldn't take long for them to put two and two together. Before the week was out, everybody would know Courtney Roberts was pregnant and Logan Hartson was the father.

Was she ready for that?

She took a deep breath, and nodded her head at her own question. She needed to be ready, because this baby wasn't

going to stop growing. “A ride would be great,” she told him softly. “The appointment is at two.”

“Then I’ll see you fifteen minutes before that.”

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



If the tiredness didn't kill her, the nausea probably would. Courtney stared at herself in the bathroom mirror, scowling at the dark shadows under her eyes. Her skin was dry and her cheeks looked sunken. Whoever talked about the pregnancy bloom was either a liar or had a completely different experience with pregnancy than she was having.

The Monday after she'd told them about her pregnancy, Ellis had treated her completely normally, as if nothing had changed. And Mary had called her into the cottage at lunchtime, serving her sandwiches and soup while telling her she needed to rest before going back out to the fields.

There had been no sign of Carl though. He hadn't called or popped around either. She wasn't sure whether to be sad or glad about that.

And now it was Thursday, the day of her first prenatal appointment. Logan was due here any minute, and the anxiety of not only seeing him again, but having to go through an exam with the midwife was sending her heart rate sky high.

She heard the low rumble of his car as it came up the long driveway, followed by a crunch as the tires met the gravel in front of the cottage. She looked at herself again, letting out a sigh, then twisted her hair into a bun and fastened it with a tie.

It was time to face the music.

She walked down the stairs, grabbing her purse before she headed for the front door, opening it to see Logan standing

there, his hand raised mid-knock.

“Hey.” His smile was soft. She swallowed hard, trying not to notice how he smelled like fresh rain on a hot day. “I brought you these,” he said, holding up a brown paper bag.

She took it, her smile bemused. “What’s inside?”

“Brownies. You said you were craving them.”

She didn’t have the heart to tell him she’d not managed to keep anything down all week. “Thank you.” Damn, he was sweet. She wasn’t sure she could handle that. “I’m kind of impressed you remembered.”

“I was serious when I said I want to take care of you.” He glanced at the bag. “And I figure the baby will be eating most of them.”

“That’s a really good excuse to pig out.”

He shrugged. “If you can’t do it now, when can you? Anyway, they’re calorie free.” He winked. “I made them myself so I can guarantee it.”

Her fingers tightened around the rolled up rim of the bag. “You made these?” She wasn’t sure why that made her throat feel tight.

“Yeah. Is that okay?” He frowned. “It’s not weird, is it?”

She shook her head quickly. “No. Not weird at all. It’s lovely.” Her voice was thick. “Thank you.”

He was overwhelming. Not just physically – though that was bad enough. It was as though he hit every sense she had without even thinking about it. He smelled good, dammit, and that wasn’t something she was used to on a farm. As for him baking for her, she wasn’t sure what to do with that thought.

“We should go,” he said, inclining his head at the car. “Make sure we’re there on time.”

She nodded rapidly. “Sure. Let me put these in the kitchen and I’ll be ready.” Flashing him a smile, she turned and walked back through the living area, glad he couldn’t see her expression.

She blew out a mouthful of air. She needed to pull herself together. By the time she turned back to where he was standing in the doorway, she had a bright smile on her face.

The appointment would take an hour at the most. Then he'd be back on a plane to Boston, and she'd be here on the farm.

"Okay," she said, the smile unwavering. "Let's go do this thing."

He stepped aside as she pulled the front door closed, then walked her to the car, opening up the passenger door and helping her inside.

"I'm ready if you are," he told her.

---

"WELL, YOU'RE DEFINITELY PREGNANT," Alice Dean, the midwife said, holding the test results up, as she sat down at the desk in front of Courtney and Logan. "And your last period was some time in mid September, right?"

Logan glanced at Courtney from the corner of his eye. Her cheeks were flushed as she nodded.

"I think so," she said. "Though I had some light bleeding in October. I didn't think anything of it until I missed the next one. But now I remember it only lasting a day. I was too busy with everything to notice something was wrong."

"A lot of women get spotting at first. It's perfectly normal. And your HCG levels are good, so there aren't any concerns there." The midwife made a note in Courtney's file. "Now, we're a little different to some other maternity units. You'll see Dr. Matthews regularly, but you'll also see me. And I'll be there at the birth, too. We like to make it as homely as possible. It makes everything easier."

Courtney nodded. "I've played midwife to a lot of sheep and pigs."

Alice grinned. “Then you know what’s ahead of you. That’s good.”

“As long as I don’t have a litter of ten, I’ll be happy.”

Logan swallowed hard. “I’m a twin,” he said, leaning forward. “Does that make it more likely that Courtney will be pregnant with multiples?”

Courtney whipped her head to look at him. “You’re a twin?” she asked, her mouth falling open.

“Yeah. I thought you knew.”

Only that he had three brothers. “No, I didn’t.” She blew out a mouthful of air and turned back to look at Alice. “Does that mean we could have twins?”

“My brother’s wife had twins last year,” Logan told them. “In case that makes any difference.”

“Are you and your twin identical?” Alice asked, her brows knitting together.

“Yep. Mirror image,” Logan told her.

“And what about your brother’s twins?” She made a note on the pad in front of her.

“They’re fraternal.”

She didn’t look surprised. Logan suspected Alice knew exactly who his brother was, even if she wasn’t saying anything. He appreciated her discretion, especially in a small town like this. “Believe it or not, there’s no link between the two sets in your family. Just pure luck.” She shrugged. “And being an identical twin doesn’t increase the odds of Courtney being pregnant with twins. It’s just a quirk of nature. Though there’s only one way to find out for sure, and that’s by having a sonogram.” Her eyes flickered over to Courtney. “We can do that today. The technician is here. I can see if she can fit you in if you’d like.”

Courtney turned to Logan with a question on her face. He nodded, and she smiled.

“Yes, please,” she told Alice.

Half an hour later, she was laying on an exam table, her top pulled up and her jeans unbuttoned at the waist. The tech was squeezing gel on her stomach, the cold making Courtney wince.

Logan shifted in the chair he'd been directed to, trying not to stare at her stomach. Was there a hint of a swell there? It was hard to tell. There would be one day, though. Sooner rather than later. And beneath that swell would be his child.

His throat tightened again, as the technician started to move the wand over Courtney's lower abdomen, her eyes on the screen in front of her. "Well the good news is there's only one."

Courtney's eyes met his. He grinned in relief.

"And the baby's the perfect size for ten weeks. Measuring about as big as a strawberry."

That was so damn tiny, it almost didn't feel real. But then the technician turned the monitor around and pointed at the image on the screen and his whole world shrunk to the size of a pin.

There was a baby, no doubt about it. Tiny limbs moved around as the technician tried to point out the head, the body, the pumping heart. But her words were just noise, a buzzing in his ear, because his baby was there.

His breath caught in his throat. Slowly he managed to tear his gaze away, lifting it to Courtney. She was staring right back at him, her eyes wide and shiny. And damn if his weren't feeling wet, too.

"You okay?" he managed to get out, his voice tight.

She nodded.

"Everything is perfect," the technician told them. "I'll print out a couple of photographs for you to keep and leave them at the front desk." She passed a wad of tissues to Courtney so she could wipe her stomach. "And I'll be seeing you again in a few months for your next ultrasound."



Courtney sat up on the bed, fastening her jeans as the technician left the room. “We’re only having one,” she said softly.

“I guess that’s good news.”

Her mouth twitched. “Good for me. I only have to push one out.”

He immediately felt guilty, because that was another thing she’d have to do because of him.

And yet there was a warmth in him too, because that baby was *his*. And he knew for certain that no matter what happened he’d protect them both. Mother and baby. The thought was like a fire scorching over his body, making his muscles tight and his breath shallow.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Courtney asked, slipping her shoes back on. “You feel far away.”

“I’m just...” He shook his head. “It’s our baby, you know?”

She blew out a mouthful of air. “Yeah,” she said. “I know.”

“He or she is perfect. Those little legs and arms.” He smiled at her. “Did you see them?”

“I did.” She grinned back, her shoulders loosening up. “And they weren’t still at all, were they? I guess he or she doesn’t have much of a chance with being calm. Not with two workaholics for parents.”

They went out through the door, stopping at the front desk for Courtney to make her next appointment. The receptionist held out the ultrasound photographs, and Courtney took one. She glanced at Logan. “Would you like the other one?” she asked tentatively.

“Is that okay?”

“Of course.”

He took it, opening his wallet and carefully sliding it inside. Baby Roberts was written in white print at the top, and for a moment he felt dismay at the words.

He wanted it to be Baby Hartson. His. And that fiery feeling of protection washed over him again.

Yeah, well that was a discussion for another day.

“You ready to go?” he asked her. “I need to head to the airport to catch my flight.”

“Will you be okay with two flights in one day?” She looked concerned.

“Yeah.” His brows knitted together. “It was hard to even take a day off. Things are crazy with opening a new restaurant right now.”

“Oh.” She pressed her lips together. “I didn’t know you were opening something new.”

He felt like a dick again, because there was so much she didn’t know about him. And if it wasn’t for the little strawberry sized life growing inside her, she probably never would know those things. “Maybe you can come and see my restaurants some time,” he said, feeling exposed. “Since the baby will spend some of his or her time in Boston with me.”

Courtney swallowed. The smile had disappeared from her lips and he was already missing it. “Of course. That would be good. Maybe once I’m in the second trimester.”

He nodded. “Let’s check our calendars and work on something.” He pulled his keys from his pocket and held the door open for her. “Come on, let’s get you home.”

---

COURTNEY SWALLOWED hard as they walked out of the doctor’s office, trying to stop the tears that were threatening to form. She was so aware of Logan standing next to her, his hand pressed lightly against the small of her back. And yes, she knew he was just being gentlemanly, but it didn’t stop her from remembering the way he’d stared at her in the ultrasound room, his eyes piercing, his lips parted. It had made her feel warm inside. And for the first time in a long time she hadn’t felt alone.

His stare had told her they were in it together. Or at least that was how it felt.

But it had been an illusion. Wishful thinking, maybe. He was only in this because he *had* to be. He was a good man who'd be there for his child and nothing more.

And he'd made it perfectly clear that their child would need to be part of his life in Boston, not Hartson's Creek. Something about that made her stomach tighten.

She rubbed her stomach, shaking her head at her own thoughts. The important thing was that the baby was well. Perfect, even. Nothing else mattered.

"I don't want to bring you down," Logan said, his voice low. "But we're attracting some attention."

Courtney blinked out of her thoughts to see two older women staring at them from the diner. Then she turned to her left and her heart almost stopped beating.

Carl was standing next to his cruiser, his eyes narrow as he stared at her and Logan.

She swallowed hard. "That's my brother-in-law." Her worried gaze met Logan's, but he didn't seem perturbed at all.

"You want to say hi?"

She shook her head. "I want to go home."

"Okay." Logan clicked the button on his key fob, and pulled the passenger door open.

"Is that him?" Carl called out, striding toward them. Courtney looked from her brother-in-law to Logan, then back again, her stomach dropping at their expressions.

"Carl, I have to go. Can I talk to you later?" she asked, her voice urgent.

"You're one of the Hartsons, right?" Carl said to Logan, completely ignoring her. "You're the guy that knocked Courtney up?"

Logan tipped his head to the side. "I'm the father of her baby." He didn't look intimidated by Carl at all, despite the

angry look on his face and the gun on his hip. “Can I help you?”

Carl’s jaw was tight as he stopped only a few inches from where Logan was standing. Carl was shorter and stockier, but it didn’t stop him from squaring up. His expression was sour, his jaw tight.

“You know she lost her husband? You took advantage of her, you asshole.” He stepped closer, but Logan didn’t flinch.

“I’m sorry you feel that way.”

“Carl, please stop,” Courtney said, her voice urgent. “People are looking.”

Instead of stopping, Carl reached for Logan’s shirt collar, wrapping his fingers around it and jerking. Logan’s head lurched forward, and he reached out to push Carl away.

“Don’t fucking touch me,” Carl told him, his voice tight. “Just keep away from her, you hear?”

“We’re having a baby,” Logan reminded him, his eyes darting to meet Courtney’s gaze. “I can’t keep away from her. She’s carrying my kid.”

Carl’s fist met Logan’s jaw with a sickening crunch. Logan’s head jerked backward, hitting the side of the passenger door. His legs buckled as he slid down against it.

“Stop!” she cried out, rushing to stand between them. Logan stood, his hand rubbing his jaw and mouth. His bottom lip had split from the impact, and he looked down at his fingers, frowning when he saw the blood.

“Carl, you need to go,” Courtney hissed. “Before I call your boss.”

Carl shook his head, his brows knitted together as though he wasn’t sure what the hell he’d just done. “I’m sorry... I...”

“Just go, please,” she told him. “Before you do something even worse.”

Logan was watching them both silently, his hand still touching his injured mouth. Carl was shaking, as though he

was in shock. He shot a final, lost glance at Courtney, then turned and walked back to his cruiser, his shoulders stooped.

“You okay?” she asked Logan, turning to him.

“Yeah.” He nodded, his fingers gingerly touching his face. “You?”

No she wasn't. Not at all. There were people dotted around the square, standing in shop doorways. And all of them were watching the most awful scene unfold in front of them.

“I'm okay,” she lied. “But we should go home. I need to check that your lip is okay.”

“It's fine.” His gaze was soft. “A little painful but fine.”

“All the same, I'll feel better if I can take a look at it.” She sat on the passenger seat. “Come on, let's go home.”

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



“*I*’m so sorry.” Courtney dabbed at the split in Logan’s lip with an antiseptic wipe. When she pulled it away he could see it was stained pink with his blood. “He shouldn’t have touched you, let alone hit you.” She sighed. “You could report him to the department if you want to. I wouldn’t blame you.”

“He’s your brother-in-law,” Logan said. “I wouldn’t do that to you.” The whole sorry mess in the town square felt like a blur. He was relieved he’d had the good sense not to hit back. Maybe he really was growing up.

The side of his head was pounding where it had slammed into the car door. Then there was the *déjà vu* he kept getting. Him sitting in this kitchen chair while Courtney leaned over him, her touch gentle as she tried to take away the sting. It reminded him of the first day they met, when she’d cleaned up the scrape he’d gotten from holding her chicken.

The draw to her was still overwhelming. His body hummed with electricity as she rubbed ointment onto his lip. It took everything he had not to kiss the tip of her finger. Not to pull her onto his lap and kiss her hard no matter how much it hurt.

And not to slide himself into her, giving himself up to sweet oblivion.

Would it always feel like this? The pull to her? That first day they met it had felt like a chemical high. Now it felt even

stronger. The need to take care of her, protect her, mingled with the desperate urge to have her.

God, he needed to get ahold of himself.

“Carl took it badly when Shaun died,” Courtney told him, screwing the top back onto the tube of ointment. “We all did, of course.” She gave him a brief smile. “But Carl, he’s never gotten over it. They were so close as kids. He was the protective big brother.” She slowly ran her tongue over her bottom lip. He tried to ignore the jolt of pleasure it caused him. “Shaun called him the night he crashed and left a voicemail asking Carl to meet him. I don’t think he’s forgiven himself for not answering the phone. As though that would have made any difference.”

Logan looked up at her through his thick lashes, trying to imagine how he’d feel if one of his brothers died trying to meet him. He swallowed hard, because it hurt to think about. It had been difficult enough when he’d been injured in junior year and it had been made clear he’d never play football again. It had felt like a bereavement, knowing he wouldn’t be able to play alongside Cam anymore.

But to imagine never seeing his brother again? The thought made him swallow hard.

“I don’t want to report him,” Logan told her. “I just don’t want him upsetting you. Or the baby.”

Courtney sighed. “I need to set him straight. He can’t go around hitting people.” She touched the side of his head. “There’s a bruise here. Does it hurt?”

“It’s not too bad.”

“Are you sure you’re okay to fly?” Her brows dipped with concern.

Logan smiled at her. “It was just a little punch. I’ve had worse during a football game. I’ll be fine.”

“Okay then.” She breathed out a sigh of relief. It could have been so much worse. *Damn Carl.*

He stood, cupping her jaw with his warm palm. “Are *you* gonna be okay?” he asked her. “That’s more important right now.”

She smiled. “I’ll be fine. Once you’re gone I plan on feeding the chickens then gorging myself on those brownies you gave me.” She glanced down at her still-flat stomach. “It’s nice to be able to eat without worrying about the calories, or getting sick.”

He glanced at his watch. It was time to leave if he wanted to catch his flight. But part of him wanted to stay. Make her a warm drink, curl up with her, and watch her go into a chocolate frenzy. Stroke her hair until she fell asleep.

“I should go,” he told her.

She glanced at her own watch. “Yeah you should. I don’t want you to be late again.”

“I won’t be able to get back for a couple of weeks, but I’ll be here for your next appointment.”

“Sure.” She nodded.

“I’ll try to stay for a day or two. Maybe we can start making a few plans,” he suggested. “Work out what we’re gonna do once the baby is here.”

“That sounds like a good idea.” She nodded. “With you in Boston and me here in Hartson’s Creek, it’s going to take some working out.”

He gave her a half smile. “I guess we like things complicated, huh?”

She laughed gently. “We sure do.”

Leaning down, he pressed his mouth against her brow, ignoring the brief pain that shot from his bottom lip. “Take care of yourself,” he murmured. “And the baby.”

“I plan on it.”

“And if you need anything, call me. Okay?” He pulled his keys from his pocket, twisting them in his hand.



She followed him to the door, pulling it open. “Have a safe flight.”

He turned to look at her. She had the strangest expression on her face. As though she didn’t want him to leave. He had to force his legs to stride forward, knowing that unless he left in the next few minutes there was no way he was catching that flight.

But even once he was in his car, driving on the highway, the desire to make a U-turn and drive back to her farm cottage remained.

Protectiveness. That’s all it was. A natural instinct for a father to take care of his family.

He shook his head at himself. Welcome to the twenty-first century, *asshole*. Courtney had made it perfectly clear she could take care of herself.

---

LOGAN WAS ALREADY REGRETTING SETTING up this video call with his siblings. It had seemed like a good plan at the time, making sure he could tell them all about Courtney’s pregnancy at once. But now, as their faces stared expectantly at him on the screen of his phone, he wondered if a text message might have been better.

“So I have some news,” he told them, bracing himself for their response.

“Okay, but tell me fast,” Cam said, his video jolting. “I’m walking into the gym and coach’ll be pissed if I’m late.”

“What kind of news?” Becca said, her eyes widening as she leaned closer to the camera. “Do you have a girlfriend? Do I need to get myself some smelling salts.” She lifted her hand to fan herself. “Do I know her?”

Logan rolled his eyes. “No, Becca, I don’t have a girlfriend.”

Gray smirked. “You kind of do, man.”

“Wait. You have a girlfriend?” Tanner’s voice rose an octave. “Why does Gray know about this and we don’t.”

Gray grimaced. “Sorry, Logan. Maddie says I need to learn to keep my damn mouth shut.”

Logan sighed, leaning his head back against his office chair. This wasn’t quite going as planned. “Can you all just shut up for a minute? I wanted to do this in person, but you’re all too damn elusive.”

“Sorry.” Becca looked appropriately contrite. “Oh my god, tell me you’re not sick. One of the guys at the distillery just came down with Lyme Disease. You don’t have that, do you?”

“Sis, if you’d just shut up, he’ll tell us.” Cam sounded pissed.

“Maybe you should shut up, dumbass,” Becca snapped back.

“I’m gonna be a dad,” Logan said, more to stop their sniping than anything else.

Cam started to laugh. “That’s a good one. But seriously, what’s this really about?”

Logan said nothing for a moment. All four of them stared back at him. Gray swallowed hard, lifting his eyebrows.

“Are you serious?” Tanner asked. “You’re not serious, right?”

“I’m serious.” Logan nodded. “Baby’s due next year.”

“Oh. My. God.” Becca’s face lit up, a huge grin lifting her lips. “Congratulations. I’m going to be an aunt again!!”

A voice echoed on Cam’s speaker. He let out a grunt of frustration. “Shit, man, I gotta go. I’ll call you later, okay?” His video disappeared before Logan could say anything else.

“Tell me everything!” Becca squeaked. “When is it due? Do you know if it’s a boy or a girl? Tell me everything.”

Tanner shook his head. “You just shattered my eardrums. Can you take it down an octave or two? I think I heard some dogs howling over your way.”

“Shut up.” Becca shook her head. “I’m just asking so you don’t have to.”

A baby started to cry. Gray’s video shifted as he hitched Presley up against his chest. “Sorry, guys, I gotta go. This kid just did a diaper filler.”

Logan smiled. “Sounds like a good time to end this call.”

“No, don’t go!” Becca begged. “You haven’t answered my questions.”

“How about you put them in writing,” Logan suggested. “I’ll answer them offline.”

She looked slightly mollified. “Okay.”

“I’ll call you later,” Tanner said. “Let you beg my forgiveness for not telling me first.”

“He should have told Cam first,” Becca pointed out. “He’s Logan’s twin.”

“Cam probably already sensed it,” Tanner said, grinning. He lifted his hand up, wiggling his fingers, pretending to be mystical. “All that twin connection stuff.”

Logan shook his head. “Goodbye, guys.”

“We’ll speak soon,” Becca said quickly. “And congratulations.”

Tanner and Gray echoed the same sentiments, then Logan ended the call, shaking his head at his siblings’ antics. He was almost certain that Becca was already typing her questions out. Tanner was probably on the phone to Van, giving her the news.

It was strange how real it felt now. Telling people made it that way. Tonight he’d call his dad and Aunt Gina and tell them as well. But right now he had one more person to tell. He stood and pushed open the door to the restaurant office.

“Hey.” Paris looked up from the laptop she was working on. They shared this space – whoever was here first got the desk, the loser got a table in the corner. “You okay? I was worried when I got your message.”

“I’m good.” Logan leaned on the wall, running his hand through his thick dark hair. “I just wanted to give you the heads up about something.”

Paris frowned. “Is your family okay? Is it your dad?”

“My family’s fine.” He bit down a smile thinking about that damn call. “But I’ve got some news. I’m having a baby.”

Paris blinked, but no other part of her moved. After what seemed like five minutes, she finally let out a sigh. “Oh god, Logan. Who is she? Are you sure it’s yours?”

“I’m sure. And I’m happy about it. No need to look so worried.”

Her eyes moved from side to side, as though she was thinking his words through. “Is it someone I know?”

“No. She lives back home.” He shrugged. “I just wanted to warn you that I’ll be flying back for the appointments. And once the baby’s here I’ll need to take a look at my commitments.”

“You want out of the business?” Her eyes widened with alarm.

“I didn’t say that.” He kept his voice patient. “But if I have joint custody I’ll need to lighten my workload. We may need to look at employing some more managers.”

“We can’t afford more managers.” Her brows knitted together.

“Of course we can. Our cash flow is steady, and getting help was always in the plan. We’ll just do it a little earlier than we’d anticipated.”

She shook her head. “You’ve thought it all through, haven’t you?”

“I haven’t had much choice.”

“Shame you didn’t think so hard about contraception.” She gave him a sour smile. “This is a mess, Logan. I didn’t even know you had someone back home. How the hell are you gonna manage a baby and the hours we work?”

“The same way everybody else does.” He shrugged. “I’ll make it work.”

“Ughhh.” She gritted her teeth together. “I can’t believe this is happening now. We’re busier than ever. Don’t you know that?”

He stared at her for a moment. “I don’t appreciate the way you’re talking to me,” he said, his voice low. “My private life is exactly that. I’ll make sure the business doesn’t suffer.”

Her angry gaze met his. “You’re a damn fool if you think you can handle this. You should just pay her off and walk away.”

“That’s the mother of my child you’re talking about,” he told her, narrowing his eyes. “I’ll thank you to be more respectful.”

Paris blew out a mouthful of air. “I need to get out of here,” she said, grabbing her designer purse and sliding it over her shoulder. “Before I say something I regret.”

“You do that.” He watched as she stalked across the room, yanking the door open and stepping out of the office. As soon as she was gone he shook his head and walked over to the table where his laptop was sitting, opening it up and relaxing into the chair.

He had work to do if he wanted to get back to Hartson’s Creek for Courtney’s next check up. And he was determined he would.

Paris would get used to it. She didn’t have a choice. He was going to be a dad, and that was more important than anything else.

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TAKING A DEEP BREATH, Courtney pressed on the buzzer next to Carl’s name. He’d lived in this apartment for the past few years, but she could only remember coming here once before. It was Shaun who’d spent the most time here, coming over to watch a game and share a beer with his brother.

Then he'd come home all riled up and she'd close her eyes tightly in bed, hoping he'd believe she was asleep.

She pressed her lips together. That was old news. It didn't matter anymore. Shaun was gone. But Carl... he was a whole other problem.

"Court?" Carl's voice echoed over the speaker. Then she heard a buzz. "It's open, come on up."

He lived on the second floor. Rather than take the elevator, she climbed the stairs, then walked down the hall to number 23. Rapping on the door, she squared her shoulders. She wasn't looking forward to this at all.

He opened the door and stepped back to let her in. His apartment was clean and well-furnished, with a long black leather sofa on one wall and a huge flat screen on the other. She took a look at him. He was wearing dark colored jeans and a black t-shirt, his hair wet as though he'd stepped out of the shower.

"You want a drink?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I'm not staying long. I just wanted to talk to you after the other day in the square."

"Yeah, about that. I should have called you. I'm sorry. I just saw him and the red mist descended."

"You behaved like an idiot," she told him. "It was horrible and embarrassing. And Logan didn't deserve that. You're lucky he didn't report you."

Carl looked down at his bare feet. "Yeah, I know."

"And you upset me."

His head tipped up. "I never wanted to do that. Never," he said, his voice urgent. "I want to protect you. He knocked you up, Court. He needs to know the consequences."

"I think he knows them," she told him.

"Is he gonna marry you? Take care of you?"

She exhaled softly. "I can take care of myself. But he wants to be a father to the baby, yes. We're talking about joint

custody.”

“The baby deserves a full time father,” Carl told her. “Not some guy who just flies in when he wants to.”

“How do you know so much about Logan?” she asked suspiciously.

Carl looked away from her. “I’ve heard some things. I don’t like the sound of him.”

“He’s a good man. And he’ll be a good father.” She sighed. “So I’d really like you not to hit him again.”

Carl looked at her through narrowed eyes. “Okay,” he said through gritted teeth. “I’ll be nice, for your sake. But if he hurts you, I’m gonna hurt him back. Just so you know. You’re family, Court, whether you like it or not. And I owe it to Shaun to take care of you.”

“I told you before, I don’t need your protection. I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself. No more threats, Carl, and no more punches, okay?” She sighed. “Because if you hurt this baby’s father, you’ll be out of my life.” She glanced at her watch. “And now I need to go. I have a hundred things to do at the farm. Are we good?”

He nodded slowly. “Yeah, we’re good.”

Courtney nodded, even though he looked anything but good. She didn’t need any more trouble from him. She had enough of it, in the form of the little strawberry growing inside of her, and it’s father. The man who set her on fire even though he shouldn’t.

It was hard enough fighting herself. She didn’t have the energy to fight anybody else.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Courtney's lips curled into a smile as she parked in the town square and climbed out of her old truck, turning to look at the giant Christmas tree in the center of the square. It was festooned with red, green, and white sparkling lights. Perched at the top was an oversized star that looked almost precarious. The rest of the square was decorated as well – with bright lanterns hanging from the oak branches, and a Christmas garland hanging from the bandstand roof. Inside was a sleigh and three comical looking reindeer, ready for the weekend before Christmas when Santa was due to visit the children of the town.

A biting wind was blowing from the west, making her pull her padded coat tightly around her. At three months pregnant, she couldn't do it up anymore, it was too tight at the waist. But she couldn't bring herself to purchase a new one either.

Not when she wanted to decorate the nursery she was putting together in the spare room of her little cottage.

“Hi. It's Courtney, right?”

Courtney turned to see a woman standing to her left, her hands curled around a double stroller. Two little boys were sitting inside, wearing matching padded jackets, wooly hats, and gloves.

“Hi.” Courtney winked at the little ones, then looked at their mom.

“I hope you don't mind me introducing myself, but I saw you walking this way and thought it would be rude not to,” she



said warmly. "I'm Maddie." She leaned forward to shake Courtney's hand. "I think we're going to be kind of related, aren't we?"

"Kind of," Courtney said shyly. "You're Gray Hartson's wife, aren't you?"

"Fiancée." Maddie grimaced. "With these two little monkeys I haven't had time to arrange the wedding. We keep talking about eloping to Vegas." She brought her gaze up to Courtney's. "Anyway, how are you doing? And congratulations."

"Thank you." Courtney smiled. "I'm doing good. Just slipping into the second trimester, which everybody tells me is a breeze compared to the first."

"It is," Maddie agreed happily. "Though the third is worse." She slapped her hand over her mouth. "Uh oh, ignore me. I'm pretty sure I wasn't supposed to tell you that. I feel like I've broken some kind of code."

Courtney couldn't help but laugh at her dismayed expression. "It's okay. It's nice to have somebody who knows how it really is. Apart from the animals on my farm, I haven't come into contact with that many pregnant women."

"In that case, we should meet up some time. I can give you all the secrets." Maddie grinned. "And I know the best places to shop for baby stuff, too. If you want any company."

It was impossible not to be drawn in by her warmth. "I'd love that."

Maddie leaned forward, rifling through the bag hanging from the stroller. "My phone is in here somewhere," she muttered, digging her hands deeper. "Give me your number and we'll arrange to meet." She looked up, her brow furrowed. "Or maybe I should give you mine. I know my phone's in here somewhere, but damn if I can find it." She reeled off her number and Courtney keyed it into her own cell.

"I'll message you now," Courtney said, tapping out a quick text. As soon as she sent it, a loud buzz came from deep in the stroller. Maddie sighed, pushing her hand down the back of

one of the twins. “Here it is. I remember now. I gave it to Marley to keep him quiet. Good thing he didn’t drop it.” She leaned closer. “Don’t tell anybody I give my sons electronics, okay?” Maddie mock-whispered. “I’ll get thrown out of mother and baby club.”

“Your secret’s safe with me,” Courtney said grinning.

“I should get these two into the warm,” Maddie said, ruffling the tops of the boys’ hats. “It was so nice to meet you. I’ll message you about that shopping date, okay?”

“Great.”

Courtney watched as Maddie struggled with the stroller, having to turn it sideways to manage her way into the diner. And with that grin still on her face, Courtney walked over to the *I Can Make You Beautiful* salon, where she had a date with Lainey, a mug of steaming hot chocolate, and a pedicure waiting.

One day in, and this second trimester thing felt like a breeze.

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***I GOT THE BROWNIES. And the carrot cake. And the red velvet cake. Thank you. I’m about to go into a sugar coma. - C***

LOGAN READ Courtney’s message on his phone and smiled.

***I WANTED to give you a choice. I read that cravings can change over time. If you start wanting to eat charcoal or something, let me know. I have contacts. - L ;)***

“TABLE THREE ARE BEING ASSHOLES,” one of the waitresses said, carrying a tray full of food back in to the chef, making Logan lift his gaze from his phone screen. “The steak is

apparently *too* well done, and nobody's gonna eat until it's ready." She sighed. "Sorry."

The chef caught Logan's eye. "The steak was perfect. Medium rare." He grabbed an oversized knife and sliced through the meat, picking it up to show Logan. "See?"

Logan nodded. "It's not you, it's them. But the customer is always right. Cook another one and send it out." He looked back at the waitress. "Is it the table in the corner?"

"The one with the eight suits. Yeah."

"If they give you any more trouble, let someone know." Logan nodded at her.

There was always one table that got out of hand during the holiday season. Usually because office parties began halfway through the day with drinks, then led to meals out, where people tried to one up each other with assholery. On the plus side, they nearly always gave good tips. He hoped the waitress would find it worth it.

"Thanks." She gave him a tight smile. "But I can handle them."

"Okay." He grinned at her. "In that case, I need to head across town." With things being so crazy he tried to visit each restaurant at least twice a week during service, as well as working on the renovation of their latest venture. He couldn't remember the last time he didn't eat on the go. Each night he'd crawl into bed sometime after two in the morning, his body aching from being up since eight the previous day.

It was manic, but this was the restaurant business. He really didn't have a choice.

When he climbed into his car, he saw Courtney had replied.

***No coal yet, but it's still early. Thank you for trying to fulfill all my needs though. - C ;)***

His skin heated up as he thought about the need he really wanted to fulfill. He shook his head at himself, a half-smile pulling at his lips. The poor woman was pregnant. She'd only

just stopped throwing up at the drop of a hat. She didn't need him lusting after her.

Yet he did. All the damn time.

He flicked the Bluetooth button on his car, and said her name. The next moment he could hear the ring of his phone echoing through the stereo speakers.

“Logan?”

“I'm driving, so I thought I'd call instead of messaging.” And if he got to hear her smooth-as-honey voice? All the better.

“You still working?” she asked softly.

“Yeah. Busiest time of the year.”

“It's our quietest.” There was a smile in her voice. “Yet at the same time we kind of fulfill the same aim, don't we?”

“Do we?” That half-smile was still lingering. It always did when he talked to her.

“We feed people. I grow it, you cook it. Same kind of thing.”

Weird how warm that made him feel. “Have you been working today?”

“A little,” she told him. “I had to repair some fences. Literally not metaphorically.” She laughed, and it made his body feel tighter. “But then I slept all afternoon. I don't know why but I've been exhausted these past few days. I thought the second trimester was supposed to be easier.”

He frowned, coming to stop at a four way. “Are you okay? Did you talk to the doctor?”

“I'm fine. And if I called the doctor every time I was tired I'd end up having to remortgage the farm.”

“You know you don't have to worry about money, right? If you need to call, you call.”

“Thank you. But really, it's to be expected. My work is physically hard even at this time of year. Add that to the

pregnancy, and being tired is par for the course. I'll be fine after a good night's sleep."

A car honked its horn and he realized it was his turn to pull out. He lifted a hand in apology and crossed the intersection. "I should be back home for a couple of days next week. I'll come and check on you."

"I thought it was your busiest time?"

Logan blinked. It was, but the need to see her overrode anything else. The business, Paris's anger, his brothers' amusement. "It's just for a couple of days. I have business to take care of there," he said smoothly. It wasn't a lie. She *was* his business, wasn't she?

Or their baby was at least. And since she was the one carrying their child, then she was his concern, too.

"Maybe I can take you out somewhere," he suggested. "Make sure you're eating properly."

Her laugh was soft. It did things to him. "I'll never say no to food right now."

"Okay. I'll send you some details. Now go to bed and get some sleep."

"You're bossy."

"Get used to it." He stopped at a red light. Glancing out of the side window, he caught his reflection in the glass. He was grinning from ear to ear.

"Good night, Logan. And thanks again for the sweets. Even if my behind doesn't thank you."

An image of her naked ass flashed through his brain. He had to blink to get it away. "Sleep tight, Courtney."

"I will. Don't work too hard."

"I'll try not to." The light turned to green as he ended the call, his mouth dry as thoughts of her rushed through his mind.

*Don't work too hard.* If he didn't know better, he'd say she cared.

And it made him feel like a damn teenager inside.

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



“Don’t sit down,” Lainey said as Courtney walked into the salon. “I’m taking you into the treatment room. You have parts I need to wax.”

Courtney blinked. Her body was shocked by the sudden warmth of the salon compared to the ice cold air outside. “I don’t need anything waxed. Nobody is going to see it,” she protested as Lainey led her to the room at the back of the salon.

“You’re going on a date tonight. There’s no way I’m letting your lady garden look like the invasion of the yetis.”

“It’s not a date.” Courtney frowned. “We’re just going out for dinner.”

Lainey slid Courtney’s too-small coat from her shoulders. “Oh my god!” she said, looking down at her stomach. “You have a bump.” She scooted down and pressed her hands against Courtney’s abdomen, though her sweater was so thick she could barely feel Lainey’s touch. “Is the baby kicking yet?”

“I won’t feel anything for a few more weeks,” Courtney told her. “But I feel like I’ve exploded. Nothing fits. I swear this isn’t supposed to happen for at least another month.”

Lainey looked up at her with a solemn expression. “It’s twins. For sure.”

“Shut up. You know we checked for that.” Courtney bit down a grin.

“Did you hear what happened to Maddie Hartson? She didn’t know she was having twins until she gave birth. Maybe that’s what’s happening here. Baby two could be hiding.”

Courtney sighed at her friend’s teasing. “Can you shut up and wax me, please?”

Lainey grinned, rubbing her hands together. “I thought you’d never ask. Now go and get changed. The gown and paper pants are all ready for you.” She leaned forward to kiss Courtney’s cheek. “Don’t worry, by the time he picks you up for this date I’ll have you looking like a bombshell.”

“It’s not a date,” Courtney reminded her, as she walked behind the screen. She hated getting changed at this time of year. In the summer, it was as simple as pulling off a dress. But peeling her clothes off in winter felt like a daunting task. Each time she took off a layer there was another underneath.

“Sure it isn’t,” Lainey called out, her voice full of amusement. “But let’s get you hair free just in case.”

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COURTNEY STARED at herself in her bedroom mirror, angling her body so she could check out her dress in the too-small glass. She’d bought it from Laura’s Boutique in the town square, having found it on the sale rack. It wasn’t a maternity dress – she wasn’t ready for that yet – but it was made of a soft cream jersey and it skimmed her curved stomach.

She hadn’t bothered doing anything with her hair, opting to let it tumble down over her shoulders. It was thick enough at the best of times, but right now it felt like more of a mane than her crowning glory. The hairs she used to have to pick up off the bathroom floor every time she washed it had been non-existent in the past few weeks. According to the website she was following, that was normal. The body liked to hold onto everything during pregnancy, including her thick brown strands.

Logan had texted earlier to tell her he’d landed and would be over at eight to pick her up. The thought of seeing him



again made her body tingle. For all she'd protested to Lainey yesterday that this wasn't a date, she still felt edgy and excited.

And yeah, her heart was speeding way too fast.

She made a face at herself in the mirror. "Co-parents," she said out loud. That's what they would be. He was here to talk details about the baby. Not to spend time with her.

Hearing the crunch of tires on the gravel path, she walked down the stairs and opened the door. Logan was climbing out of the sleek black rental, a dark suit molded to his muscled body. His gaze caught hers and he smiled.

Her heart skipped like a record on repeat.

"Hey." His voice was soft as he reached the porch. He almost ran up the stairs before he pressed his lips to her cheek. "You look beautiful."

She felt her skin heat up under his lips. "Thank you." She lifted an eyebrow. "You look pretty good yourself. Nobody would ever believe you've been on a plane for hours."

"It's not that long." He shrugged. "And I'm used to traveling." He inclined his head at the car. "You ready to go?"

"Let me grab my coat. It's cold out tonight."

"I heard there might be some snow."

"I heard that, too." She pulled on her coat and stepped outside, the biting cold wrapping around her. "It's the chickens I feel sorry for. They hate the cold."

Logan followed her glance. "Is the one that scratched me still in there?"

"Hester?" She grinned. "Oh yeah. She still rules the roost. Literally."

He wrinkled his nose, amusement curling his lips. "I don't mind if that one gets cold. I'll save my sympathy for the rest."

"She's a doll, really," Courtney told him. She pulled the front door closed and tried not to shiver as he slid his arm around her waist, gently guiding her down the stairs. "You

should wear that scar with pride. If she scratches you, she likes you.”

“Is that right?” he murmured, opening the passenger door. “I’ve heard of a few women like that.”

Courtney laughed. “I bet you have.”

“I do owe her for one thing though.” He closed her door and walked around to the driver’s side, settling himself in. “If it wasn’t for her running out in front of me, we never would’ve met.” Pressing the ignition button, he turned to her, that half-smile playing at his lips again. Her breath caught in her throat at his intense stare. The space between them crackled with electricity.

It was as though she was programmed to respond only to him. She’d never felt anything like it before. Yeah, she’d heard about instant attraction. But until Logan, she hadn’t believed in it. She’d certainly never experienced it. Not with Shaun or anybody else.

And now her body was responding in ways she’d never imagined. She shifted in her seat in an attempt to break the connection. “Where are we going?” she asked, staring out of the window. The dark sky was covered with grey clouds.

“Actually, we’re almost there.” He turned left toward Maple Cross. A mile down the road he pulled into a driveway, his car bouncing over the rocks and stones that peppered the surface. On either side lights were strung between lampposts, and at the end was a ranch-like house covered with bright Christmas decorations.

There was a big painted sign in front of it. *The Secret Gourmet*.

“What is this place?” she murmured.

“It’s owned by a friend of mine,” he told her as he pulled the car into a bay at the side of the house. “They serve gourmet meals in their home. Kind of like a paid-for dinner party. Usually they’re booked months in advance, but they managed to fit us in.”

“I’ve never heard of it.” Not that she got out enough to even know about places like this.

“They don’t advertise.” He opened her door and helped her out. She could get used to this. “They don’t need to. It’s all word of mouth. And when you know about it, you’re in on the secret.” He smiled at her. “But more than anything, the food is amazing.”

“That’s high praise from you.”

He shrugged. “I like good food. I think you’ll like this place, too.” He knocked on the door.

A moment later it was opened by a thirty-something woman. As soon as she saw Logan, her face lit up. “Oh my god, look at you. You’re more handsome than ever.” She leaned forward to hug him tight, then turned to Courtney. “Hi, and welcome,” She said. Her smile was warm. “Come in from the cold.” She ushered them in, taking Courtney’s too-small coat from her shoulders. “If you’ll go into the living room, Dan has some cocktails waiting. You’re both on the virgin ones, right?”

Logan glanced at Courtney and winked. “Yeah, that’s right.”

“I could have driven if you wanted to drink,” Courtney told him. “You should have said something.”

“If you’re not drinking, neither am I.” He slid his hand down her back, pressing his palm into the small of her back. “It’s no big deal.”

But it was to her. Another little hint of how attentive he was. “This place is beautiful,” she said as he lead her through the hallway to a doorway at the end. “All these decorations look antique.”

“Ellie and Dan inherited this house from her grandfather,” he told her as he pushed open the door to the living room. “It was completely run down when they got it. They’ve spent the last few years renovating it, funding the rebuild by feeding people. In the summer, they have barbecues and cook outs in

the backyard. And this is the second winter that they've run their dinner parties. Ten guests maximum each time."

They walked into the beautifully furnished living room, complete with an oversized Christmas tree and inglenook fireplace. In the corner was a bar, and a bearded man was grinning at them. Like his wife, Dan walked around and immediately hugged Logan. "I wasn't expecting to see you this side of Christmas," he said, his voice booming out. "You must be crazy busy in Boston."

"As always." Logan grinned. "But I had some business this way." He glanced at Courtney, his eyes warm. "This is Courtney Roberts."

"Dan Mitchum. Pleased to meet you." Dan shook her hand. "And I hear congratulations are in order."

Courtney blushed, touching her stomach without thinking. "Thank you."

"I told him about your pregnancy. I hope that's okay. Sometimes they serve things you're not supposed to eat," Logan told her.

"Don't worry, there's no shellfish or soft cheese tonight," Dan said. "And no alcohol, of course. Speaking of which, here are your cocktails." He walked over to the bar and picked up two long stemmed glasses filled with a bubbling pink liquid. Passing them to Logan and Courtney, he nodded at the door. "I'm heading to the kitchen. You two sit in here and enjoy your drinks. We'll call you when we're ready."

"Is anybody else joining us?" Logan asked.

"We have a group of eight in the dining room, so we've put you in the conservatory," Dan said. "The best seats in the house." He smiled at Courtney. "The conservatory is Ellie's baby. She designed it, then helped build it. We don't let just anybody sit out there. But Logan's family. He always gets a pass."

There was something so warm in the way he was smiling at Logan. She realized with a shock that it was the first time she'd seen him interacting with a friend. All the other times

they'd been together they'd either been alone – and mostly in bed – or at her appointments.

It was like seeing a whole new side to him. He was liked by his friends. Loved, even. And it made her heart skip a beat.

Because she liked him, too. A lot.

“Come on, let's sit down,” Logan murmured, pressing his hand into the small of her back again. She felt his thumb rubbing a circle into her skin through the jersey of her dress, and it sent a shiver down her spine.

Was it her, or was it getting warm in here?

---

“How DO you know Ellie and Dan?” she asked Logan as they ate their final dish. This one was a traditional British Christmas pudding, full of fruit and spices, with a side of whipped cream. They'd eaten five courses in total. An amuse-bouche of creamed cauliflower with shaved truffle that sounded mundane, but made her tongue sing with delight. Then a starter of pumpkin and chili soup with parmesan croutons that made her groan out loud. By the time their main course of beef wellington with sautéed potatoes and honeyed carrots came out, her stomach was already full. Yet she'd still managed to finish that – and the lemon sorbet they'd sent out as a palette cleanser.

But this pudding was getting the better of her. She admitted defeat, putting her spoon down in the half-eaten bowl.

“I've known Dan for years. He had a place in Maple Cross before he met Ellie. I used to eat there whenever I came home. He visited Boston a few times as well, and we'd exchange ideas.” Logan shrugged. “He sold his restaurant when Ellie inherited this place. It was a gamble, but as you can see, it's paid off.”

“They must have to charge a lot if they only feed ten people a night.”

“Yeah, but it’s worth every cent,” Logan told her, finishing his dessert. “You don’t get food like this without being willing to pay top dollar for it.”

“Have you always loved food?”

He grinned. “Who doesn’t?”

“Did you always want to be in the restaurant business?” she persisted. This was a whole other side to him. One she wanted to know more about.

For the baby. *Of course.* He or she would be part of Logan’s world, after all.

“I thought I was gonna be a football star like Cam,” he admitted. “Until my knee got blown at the age of sixteen.”

Courtney’s brows lifted. He’d told her a little about his twin and his career, but she had no idea Logan had played football, too. “That must have been hard.”

“It killed me,” he admitted, looking at her through his thick lashes. “For the first year or two it felt like grief. We’d always done everything together. And while he was still flying high on the football field, I felt like nothing.”

Her heart contracted. It was hard to imagine this confident, strong man as a teenager. His future being ripped from under his feet. “Is it still hard watching him play?”

He shook his head. “I enjoy watching him. But I don’t miss playing. Not anymore. Sometimes I feel like I dodged a bullet thanks to that injury. Cam’s career is hard on his body. And on his time. He never has much left for himself.”

“Nor do you from what I can see.”

He leaned forward. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Yes you are.” Her voice was soft. Every time he looked at her it made her chest tight. Like the air was being squeezed out of her. “And thank you for bringing me here. It’s amazing. Dan and Ellie have done a wonderful job.”

They’d been wonderful hosts, too. Ellie had chatted with them between courses. And after he served the sorbet, Dan had

pulled up a chair for five minutes and asked Courtney about the farm and her chickens. He'd even asked if she'd consider supplying the restaurant with eggs. They'd agreed he'd visit the farm and check out the samples. She couldn't wait to tell Ellis she might have found a new customer.

Then he and Logan talked about the restaurant business, and about Logan's newest venture. As they'd talked, she'd felt strange again. As though his life was nothing to do with her.

And really, it wasn't. Not unless their baby was involved.

She took a deep breath and forced a smile onto her lips. "We were supposed to be talking about the baby tonight. And custody plans. Did you still want to do that?"

He cleared his throat, his eyes catching hers. "Yeah," he said, his voice gruff. "We should."

Ellie walked in to take their final plates. "Would you guys like coffee? We have decaf."

"Not for me, thank you." Courtney sat back and rubbed her stomach. "I'm so full I don't think I'll eat for a week."

"Ah, but you're eating for two," Ellie told her with a smile. "It's your duty."

"I like the sound of that." Courtney couldn't help but smile at Ellie. There was a natural ease to her. No wonder she and Dan were so successful. They were the consummate hosts.

She felt a little frisson of excitement about supplying them with eggs, if they were good enough. It would be nice to have a few more friends. Goodness knew she needed them.

When Ellie had gone, Courtney looked back at Logan. His eyes were speculative as they scanned her face. As though he was trying to figure something out.

"So I'm planning to nurse the baby. For at least twelve months if it works out." She gave him a smile. "But I can pump and give you bottles for when it's your time with him or her."

He nodded, his eyes serious. "I think I'll fly back here for my custody time. For the first year, at least. I don't want you

or the baby having to fly to Boston when they're so little."

"Oh." She blinked with surprise. "I didn't realize you'd do that." She was glad, though. The distance between here and Boston scared her. She wasn't sure how she'd feel being so far from her baby.

"I want to make this as easy as possible." He smiled softly. "For both of us."

"Will you stay with your family?"

"I haven't thought about that yet. I guess at first I will. But I might look into buying. It makes sense to have a permanent base here for the baby."

"That's a big commitment."

He grinned at her. "Not as big as having a baby."

"You're right." She let out a laugh. "I guess we're doing this the wrong way round."

He tipped his head to the side. "I guess we are. But it feels okay, you know? Like this was somehow meant to happen."

"You think?"

"Don't you?" he asked her.

She bit her lip, thinking about his question. "Maybe you're right," she conceded. "I guess I was shocked at first. But it's amazing how quickly you get used to something like this." Maybe even excited, though she wasn't sure how to vocalize that. "It's like my future's suddenly become a little more clear."

He nodded, his lip quirking up. "That's exactly it. It makes you realize what's important and what isn't. Gray told me that being a father makes you grow up like nothing else does. It's not about being a certain age, or having money, or even being in control of your own destiny. It's about being responsible for something so damn important you'd do anything to make it work."

Her mouth felt dry. There was an intensity to his stare that made her heat up. She wanted to bask in his warmth.



“How often do you think you’ll come back?” she asked.

“I want to try for every other weekend. I know from watching my nephews how quickly kids can grow. I don’t want to miss a thing.”

She nodded. “That can work. And there’s always phone calls and Facetime and maybe we can visit you too. Until the baby’s old enough to come visit on their own.”

“You’re making this seem easy,” he teased.

“Yeah, well so are you. I thought you’d want nothing to do with us when I told you. You were so shocked.”

“I’d never abandon a child of mine.” He lifted an eyebrow. “Maybe that’s why I never thought about having any.” Logan cleared his throat. “How about you? Did you and Shaun think about having kids?”

She felt a shiver run down her spine. “No.” She breathed out softly. “And I’m glad you’re going to be there for our child. It means a lot.”

“I’m glad you’re going to be, too.” His gaze clashed with hers. “You look exhausted,” he told her, his stare softening. “Let me take you home.”

She did feel tired. It was way past the time she usually climbed into bed. “Thank you,” she told him. It was for more than just the dinner he’d bought her. More, even, than the fact he was going to co-parent this baby with her. It was gratitude for giving her something she hadn’t thought about in a long, long time.

For the first time in forever, the future was looking bright.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Logan glanced at her from the corner of his eye as he steered his car into Courtney's driveway. Her eyes were closed, her head leaning against the window, peaceful breaths escaping from her half-open lips. She'd fallen asleep almost as soon as they'd left Dan and Ellie's place. It made him feel strangely warm inside to have her slumbering next to him. Almost as if they were a real family and he was taking care of her and their unborn baby.

He shook his head at himself. In another lifetime, maybe.

He parked next to her cottage and shut off the engine, turning to look at her again.

God, she was beautiful. It made his chest ache to look at her. The dress she was wearing clung to every curve, the fabric so soft he wanted to bury himself in it. And escape inside those dark crazy curls that tumbled over her shoulders, too. To dip his head and breathe in the floral aroma of her shampoo.

Stalker much? He swallowed a sigh and leaned forward to gently touch her shoulder. "Court," he said, his voice low. "We're back at yours."

Her eyes slowly blinked open. She stared at him glassy eyed for a moment, then her gaze softened as she took him in. For a moment, all he could think about was kissing those soft lips. To taste her with his tongue, to make her sigh softly, the way he'd done before. It felt like a lifetime ago.

"Did I fall asleep?" she asked, her voice still groggy.

“Yeah.” He gave her a half-smile. “Let me walk you inside. You should head straight for bed.” He opened the car door and the cold winter air rushed in, followed by a blur of brown feathers as a squawking hen launched herself in through the gap.

“Shit!” Logan leaned back, trying to keep his head out of the way of the bird’s flapping wings. He reached out, trying to catch her, but the hen was too damn slippery.

“What the hell’s on her wings?” he muttered.

“That’s Hester. I put Vaseline on her feathers in the winter.” Courtney was wide awake as she leaned forward, trying to wrap her hands around the bird. But Hester ran across Logan’s lap, still squawking loudly as she tried to escape them both. Giving them a scornful backward glance, the hen jumped back out of the car and ran across the yard, her wings flapping. “What the hell’s she doing out of the coop?” Courtney asked.

His gaze met Courtney’s. “I guess she can’t resist me.”

She laughed, even though her eyes were tired. “I should go catch her and check the wire on the coop. It must have come loose again.”

“I’ll do it,” he told her, stepping out of the car. “You’re exhausted. Go to bed.”

“But your suit...”

Logan looked down at the dark blue jacket and tailored pants he was wearing. Sighing, he slid the jacket off, and unfastened the tie, laying them both on the driver’s seat. “Go to bed,” he told her as she stepped out of the car. “I got this.”

“I need to count the chickens. Make sure they’re all there.”

“I’ll count them. Right after I catch that damn hen.”

“She likes you,” Courtney reminded him. “Go easy on her.” She climbed out of the passenger side and turned to look at him. “Are you sure I can’t help?”

“Nope. How hard can it be?”

“I’ll sit on the stoop,” she told him. “In case you need help. Or advice. Just yell, okay?”

As it turned out, catching an oiled-up hen was trickier than he’d thought. Logan had to chase her around the cottage three times, listening to Courtney laugh every time Hester dodged out of his grasp. Her wings would flap until she was about eight feet in the air before she gently wafted down again. The third time, he managed to grab her leg, and she turned her beady eyes on him, looking outraged that he’d finally gotten the better of her. She flapped her wings again, but he refused to let go, pulling her into his arms. He could feel her slick feathers against his shirt as he held her tightly, stalking across the earthy path toward the coop she’d escaped from.

Clearly unhappy at being caught, she pecked his hand hard with her pointed beak. “Fuck,” he muttered, wincing at the sudden pain shooting through his arm.

“Did she get you?” Courtney called out.

“Just a bit. I’m fine.”

“She doesn’t like being held too tight. It makes her anxious.”

“Now you tell me,” he muttered.

The other hens were asleep when he reached the sprawling coop. He opened the door a smidgen and pushed Hester inside, then quickly counted them all. “I see forty-four,” he called out eventually.

“Including Hester?” Courtney’s voice came from around the corner, where she was still sitting on the front porch.

“Nope. Forty-four plus Hester.”

“Forty-five. That’s right.” There was a smile in her voice. “Can you see where she escaped from?”

“The wire’s loose at the corner again.” He hunkered down on his leather dress shoes, pulling at the guilty piece of fence. He hooked it over the nails on the wooden frame, trying to ignore the way Hester was stalking toward him, a look of murder in her eyes.

“And you like me?” he asked her. “You could be a little nicer.” He pushed at the wire to check it was secure. “I’ve fixed it for now,” he called out to Courtney. “But I can come back in the morning to make sure it stays that way.”

“I thought you were catching the first flight to Boston?” she shouted through the darkness.

“I am. But I can change it.”

“Ah, either Ellis or I can take care of it. It really needs replacing. But thank you, anyway. You want to come in and wash up?”

He stood up, giving Hester one last glare, then walked back around the cottage toward the porch.

Courtney was standing at the top of the stairs, her lips curled with amusement as she caught his gaze. “Look at you, farm boy,” she said, her voice low.

Damn, he wanted her. He took a step forward, his body lighting up with every inch closer he got to her. Her gaze was warm as he walked up the front steps, stopping only a foot away from where she was standing.

“You’ve got a feather in your hair,” she whispered, reaching up to take it out. But instead of pulling away, she slowly caressed his cheek, her fingers feathering against his skin. “Thank you,” she said softly.

She was too much. *Everything*. He couldn’t take the ache in his body any more. Without drawing a breath, he crashed his mouth against hers, kissing her hotly in a way he’d only dreamed of for months.

Then she was kissing him back, her arms wrapped around his neck, her sweet body pressing into his. She was everything he remembered. Warm and soft, yet able to set his soul on fire. He slid his hands down her back, cupping her behind as he lifted her against him. Stepping forward until she was wedged between him and the wall of her cottage, he kissed her again, his tongue sliding against hers. His heart was hammering against his chest, his dick hard and needy as he pressed himself against her, as Courtney’s fingers tangled into his hair.

“My bedroom,” she said, her breath hot against his lips. “Now.”

She didn't need to ask him twice. There was nowhere else he wanted to be apart from inside her. He let her down from his hold long enough for her to open the front door, then scooped her up again, unwilling to be parted from her for a moment more.

Her lips curled against his as he kissed her once more, kicking the front door shut with the sole of his shoe before he shucked them both off and carried her up the stairs.

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“SHOULD I USE SOMETHING?” he murmured against her lips as she unbuttoned his shirt, sliding it off his shoulders. Her dress was already pooled on the floor, her bra nestled on top of it. The way he wanted to take care of her touched her more than it should.

“Kinda like bolting the stable door after the horse is gone,” she told him with a wry grin. He laid her back on the bed, and unfastened his pants. “Anyway, for what it's worth I'm clean. I got tested at the last appointment.” Her eyes lifted to his. “And I haven't been with anybody since we were last together.”

“Neither have I.” His voice was thick. He ran his hands up her bare legs, sliding them apart and staring straight at her panties. “These are beautiful,” he said, running his thumb over the ivory lace. She felt the pad press against the most sensitive part of her, and the shot of pleasure made her toes curl up. “But they need to come off,” he told her, hooking his thumbs around the elastic and pulling it down. He threw the lace behind him, then traced his fingers over her hips and stomach, his eyes intense as he took her in. “Do you know how often I've thought about this?” he asked her. “How many times I've imagined you laying naked in front of me? I could get high off the taste of you.” He leaned closer to the center of her, until he was only a breath away. “I want to drown in you and never surface again.”

She loved how intense he was. How his need matched hers. “I’ve thought about you, too,” she told him. “Every night.”

“Do you touch yourself when you think of me?” His gaze lifted.

She nodded, feeling her cheeks flush.

“Good. Show me.”

She’d forgotten how bossy he was in bed. And how much she liked it. She pulled her lip between her teeth, hovering somewhere between embarrassment and desire as she slowly slid her right hand down her body, hesitating as she reached the top of her pelvis.

He caught her wrist, lifting her palm to her lips. Then he slid his mouth around her middle and pointer finger, flickering his tongue over them as he sucked tightly.

“Oh,” she sighed, pleasure tightening at the center of her.

“Now touch yourself.” He put her hand right where he wanted it, his eyes darkening as she slowly dragged her fingers down the center.

“You’re beautiful.” His voice was raspy as she moved rhythmically against herself, her nipples tightening as she slowly rode the wave of desire. “Slide them in,” he urged. “Yeah, like that.”

She was on the edge just from a few simple touches. But it wasn’t her that was taking her there, it was him. His commands, his desire, the pure pleasure he was getting from watching her. He made her feel like she was the center of his universe.

He was definitely the center of hers right now.

“I’m so close,” she whispered. “Should I?”

He swallowed hard, staring at her as though she was more edible than anything they’d eaten tonight. Then he breathed her in again, letting out a low groan as he slowly ran the tip of his tongue against her aching flesh.

Her breath caught in her throat as he circled her again and again, using his hand to encourage her own as she slid her fingers in and out. Her head fell back on the bed, her body arching as her whole world narrowed to a single pinpoint, reaching the precipice and teetering, until he closed his lips around her clit and sucked.

Behind her closed lids, everything exploded. Her muscles tightened, her body lifted, and she called out his name. Then he was moving up the bed, kissing her with his warm lips, swallowing her cries as if they were nectar to his soul.

Before she could take another breath, he was inside her, the tight, full sensation making her orgasm peak once more. He held her close, his breath short and hot as he took her again and again. And when he came, spilling hotly into her, he whispered her name against her lips. Then he rolled over, pulling her with him, as though he couldn't bear to be parted from her.

Which was perfect, because she didn't think she could bear it either.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Hearing her phone ringing from the kitchen, Courtney rushed back into the cottage, pulling the door closed quickly to keep out the cold air. It had been two days since Logan had returned to Boston, yet he'd called her at least four times since then. So it was no surprise to see his name on the screen when she picked it up from the counter and swiped her finger across to accept the call.

"Hey," she said, a little breathless. "I was just checking on the hens. Have you been calling long?"

"It went to voicemail once," he admitted, sounding sheepish. "I was worried, so I thought I'd call again."

She leaned against the counter and smiled. "Well I'm glad you did. It's nice to hear your voice." There was another box of pastries on the counter – delivered today, courtesy of Logan – and the aroma of cinnamon and apples filled the air. "I got the Danishes. Thank you." Her lips curled up. "I've only eaten two so far."

"The baby's restrained today," he teased. She'd been blaming all her extra eating on the baby, but the fact was she couldn't resist the sweet smell of everything he sent her. And if she couldn't eat without regard now, when could she?

"At least somebody is." She laughed. "How's work? You must be so busy right now."

He sighed. "Yeah. It's full on. Would you believe there's a coffee shortage? In Boston? Our supplier ran out of our usual

blend and it's been a headache sourcing something similar. Then there's the usual. Staff bitching about some of them getting better tips than others. Plus the renovation in Back Bay." He gave a little chuckle. "Sorry, this must be boring as hell to listen to. I'll stop moaning."

"No. I like hearing about your work. It beats wrangling chickens."

"I can guarantee your work is harder than mine. How is Hester, anyway?"

"Missing you." She paused, realizing what she'd said. But it was true. Not about Hester, but about her. He'd only been gone for two days, yet it felt like weeks. "Oh, did I tell you that Ellie and Dan came over this morning? They're going to take three dozen eggs from us a day. At this rate I'll have to get more hens."

"Try not to get any more like Hester," he suggested, making her laugh again. "And yeah, Dan called me to rave about the eggs. Shame you can't ship them up to Boston, I'd buy them all."

Her smile faltered at the reminder of how far away he was from her. In geographical terms, five hundred miles wasn't that much. It was drivable in a day, after all. Flight times were less than two hours.

But it wasn't just the distance. It was the difference in their lifestyles. She was up early, tending to the livestock and working on the farm. He worked late – long after midnight. Some days he was climbing into bed around the time that she was taking her morning shower.

And she couldn't see how to bridge the gap between them.

Yeah, the sex was hot. And they were both determined to make things easy between them so the baby could see both of its parents. But it wasn't going to be a breeze. Not by a long shot.

Giving birth sounded simple compared to the aftermath.

"So, I called to ask you a question," he said, his deep voice cutting through her thoughts.

She let out a lungful of air and let the smile return to her lips. “Okay. Shoot.”

“What are you doing on Christmas Eve?”

“Um, nothing really. I go to church on Christmas Day so I’m usually in bed by ten the night before. Why do you ask?”

“My family are all getting together at my brother’s place. Everybody will be there. I thought it might be a good time for you to meet them all. Only if you want to, of course. No pressure.”

“Are you sure they want me there? I’m not really family.”

“Of course you are.” His voice was firm. “You’re having my baby. That makes us family. And I want you there.”

The familiar warmth washed over her. “Then I’d like to come. Which brother’s house?”

“Gray. He has the biggest house, though Tanner’s is pretty huge, too.”

“And will Cam be there?” She felt strange at the thought of meeting him. From the photographs Logan had shown her, the two of them were virtually doubles, though you could tell them apart from their hairstyles and the clothes they wore. Logan was always slick and sophisticated, where Cam was casual.

But it wasn’t the similarity that made her hesitate. It was the fact they were so close. For a while, they’d both had the same dream of playing in the NFL. And even now they lived in the same city.

Cam was important to Logan. All his family were. And that made their opinions matter. Would they think less of her for getting pregnant?

“Maddie specifically asked me to invite you,” Logan said, as though he could read her thoughts. “She’s looking forward to seeing you again.”

“Did she tell you we bumped into each other? She’s so sweet. She messaged me to suggest we go shopping after Christmas and start up a registry for the baby.” She smiled at

the thought. “I guess we’ll need to get two of everything, since you’ll have him or her some nights.”

“Yeah, I guess.” His voice sounded a little strange. “I hadn’t thought about that.”

“We have plenty of time.” Was it weird she wanted to reassure him. He was so naturally confident and calm that she didn’t like hearing the hesitation in his voice.

“We do. And I’ll be able to concentrate on things more once the new restaurant opens.”

“When are you planning on opening it?” she asked him.

“It’s due to be ready late January, if all goes to plan.”

“Not long then.” No wonder he sounded so harassed. “How many restaurants will you have?”

“This is our fourth. The plan was always to have five in the city and surrounding areas, then look at expanding in the east. New York, Washington D.C., possibly further south.”

She tried to imagine him running this empire he was creating with a baby in his arms, but it was impossible. She’d already begun to think about how she would juggle working on the farm and taking care of their child. It wouldn’t be easy, but compared to his life it was a piece of cake.

“Sounds demanding.”

He chuckled. “You could say that.” She could hear the murmur of another voice. “Listen, I have to go. I’ll pick you up at seven on Christmas Eve if that works?”

“Sounds perfect, thank you.”

“Everything else okay?” he asked, as though he wasn’t quite ready to hang up.

“Everything’s fine,” she said, her voice teasing. “Now go and sort out your restaurants.”

“I’ll talk to you soon. Take care.”

He ended the call and she put the phone back on the counter, running her finger along her bottom lip. Why was it

that everything seemed so easy when it was just the two of them?

And why was it that everything else – his work, her in-laws, the distance between them – seemed so damn complicated?

Add in a baby, and they were asking for trouble.

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“HE WANTS you to meet his family on Christmas Eve? That’s intense. Are you ready for it?” Lifting a handful of Courtney’s curls, she inspected them closely. “You need to condition these before you go.” She sighed. “Dammit, if you would’ve told me I could have booked you in for a blow out, but we’re completely full. Maybe I can arrange for somebody to lock Mrs. Fairfax in her house...”

“Stop it.” Courtney laughed. “I don’t need another blow out. You made me come in last week, remember? And it’s just a casual thing. That’s what Logan says. Jeans and sweaters and old Christmas movies.”

Lainey pressed her lips together, her eyes scanning Courtney’s face.

“What?” Courtney asked, wrinkling her nose at the scrutiny. Lainey had stopped in on her way home from the salon, after another late night teasing and primping the good folk of Hartson’s Creek. When Courtney had opened the front door to her, a single snowflake had fallen to her feet, its journey so gentle that at first she’d thought it was a feather.

She and Ellis had spent the day changing the animals’ beds in the barns and coops, making sure they were warm enough for the forecasted snow storm. It was only supposed to last for one day, according to the overly-excited forecaster on the evening news earlier, but Ellis was adamant the animals needed to be comfortable.

“What exactly is going on with you and Logan anyway?” Lainey finally asked, lifting the mug of coffee to her lips.

“What do you mean?”

“Are you a couple now?” Lainey pressed her lips together. “After all, he’s introducing you to his family. That has to mean something.”

“We’re not a couple.” Courtney pulled her lip between her teeth, considering her friend’s question. “We don’t even live in the same state. And we hardly know each other. It’s too early for that kind of thing.”

“Honey, you’re having a baby. It’s too late rather than too early.” Lainey bit down a grin. “I don’t get this. The sex is hot, he’s the daddy of your baby, and he’s absolutely gorgeous. So why aren’t you making it official?”

Courtney leaned heavily on the counter, staring down at her untouched decaf coffee. “It isn’t that easy. This was never supposed to be more than a casual thing. And I know the baby’s put a wrench in that. But the fact is he lives in Boston and I live here and he hasn’t even asked if I want to be more than co-parents.” She glanced down at her stomach, rubbing it softly. Her bump was really beginning to show now, and she was finding it hard not to touch. It was crazy how quickly she’d gotten used to the idea of a little life growing inside her. It felt so natural. So real. She couldn’t think of a safer place for her baby than where he or she was resting right now.

“I hate to tell you, but you’re already more than co-parents. Every time you see him you end up in bed together.” Lainey shook her head, her brows knitting together. “I’m scared you’re going to end up getting hurt.”

“Hurt? How?”

“You get this funny look on your face when you talk about him. Your voice goes all low, too. I think you’re falling for him, and I know you, Courtney. You’re not cut out to do casual.”

“I’ll be fine.” Courtney gave her a reassuring smile. “I’m a big girl.”

“But what about the baby? When he or she is born? Are you gonna carry on sleeping with Logan? Won’t that confuse

your child?"

The smile faltered on Courtney's lips. "I don't know. I haven't thought that far ahead."

"Well you need to. Because this thing between the two of you is so hot I feel like I get burned every time we talk. And if *I* feel like that, god only knows how you feel. And we're adults. We can deal with the grey areas of relationships. But kids? They want certainty. They either want mommy and daddy together, or they want them apart. I can tell you for sure what they don't want is some on-again off-again relationship where they don't know where their parents stand." Lainey sighed. "I'm sorry. I know this is none of my business. But I love you and I know how much you've been through."

Courtney slid her fingers through Lainey's. "I love you, too," she said, her voice thick. "And I know you're only asking because you care about me. And you're right. I need to figure out what's going on. Because I'm going to be a mom, and that's the only important thing in this situation."

"Maybe he'll ask you to be with him," Lainey said, her eyes widening. "Would you move to Boston?"

"I can't. My life is here." Courtney sighed. "I love this farm. And I don't think Ellis could cope without me." Her stomach twinged at the thought of it. "I couldn't do that to him and Mary." She lifted her gaze to Lainey's. "And I couldn't move away from you, either. I don't know what I'd do without you."

Lainey grinned. "Thank god. I was wondering when you were gonna remember me. I'm going to be the favorite aunt, remember?"

"Of course I remember." Courtney squeezed her hand again. "I guess I have a lot to think about."

"Think about it after Christmas. After you've met the family." Lainey's eyes crinkled with amusement. "And who knows, maybe Logan'll decide to move here to be with you and the baby."

“I don’t think that’ll happen,” Courtney admitted. “His face lights up whenever he talks about his restaurants. You only have to look at him to see he’s happy in Boston.” She smiled softly. “And Cam is there, too.”

“Well, you know I’ll always be here for you. Me and Hartson’s Creek are in a permanent relationship.” Lainey rolled her eyes. “It’s probably the only relationship I’ll get in a town like this. Unless Ryan Reynolds drives up to my parlor and asks me for a back, sack, and crack.”

Courtney’s mouth dropped open. “Lainey!” She leaned forward. “Tell me you don’t do that.”

“Nobody’s asked yet, but I’d do it for Ryan.” She winked. “But anyway, enough talk of guys. I have your Christmas gift here.” She pulled a small box out of her bag, handing it to Courtney. “And one for the baby, too.”

“You’re spoiling him or her already.” Courtney kissed her cheek. “But thank you. I have yours under the tree.” She walked around the counter to the small living room. She’d put the tree up last week. It was the same plastic one she and Shaun had. They’d bought it the year they married, complete with ornaments that came in the same box. It would always get thrown up at the last minute – they were too busy to do anything else. For the last two years she hadn’t bothered, but this year, even though the baby wasn’t born yet, she felt an urge to put it up.

It looked a little forlorn with its red ornaments, red tinsel, and lights that didn’t even flash. Next year she’d have a real one. And she’d buy new decorations, too. The baby would be almost six months old at Christmas. The thought of it made her feel all warm inside. Even if her baby didn’t know what Christmas was, she couldn’t wait to make new traditions with her child.

“Here you go,” she said, turning to Lainey with a smile. “But don’t open it until Christmas day.”

Lainey grinned. “It doesn’t look like Ryan Reynolds. Unless you vacuum packed him.”



“Never say never.” Courtney winked.

“Well thank you.” Lainey hugged her tight. “And I’m sorry for asking too many questions. Even though as your best friend it’s kind of my duty.”

“It’s all good. They’re things I should be asking myself, anyway.”

“When the holidays are over,” Lainey reminded her. “Right, I’d better go and put vacuum-packed Ryan under my tree.” She gave Courtney a warm smile. “Merry Christmas, sweetie. Enjoy it. It’s your last one before the baby.”

“I know.” Courtney nodded, her lips curling up. No matter what happened, this baby – her and Logan’s – was the most important thing.

And if that meant working out what the heck was happening between her and Logan? Well, she’d have to do that, too.

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN



The imposing black gates slowly opened, and Logan put his foot on the gas pedal, inching forward onto Gray and Maddie’s graveled driveway. His flight had arrived late that afternoon, thanks to a snowstorm that had lasted longer than predicted. He silently thanked the heavens for the fact the rental company still had some four-wheel drive SUVs available, rather than the usual sports cars he preferred.

Gray and Maddie had gone all out on the Christmas decorations. On either side of their expansive ranch house were two giant fir trees, their boughs wrapped with sparkling lights. The house was lit up, too, strings of bulbs lined across the eaves and around the windows. And in front of the sweeping steps that led up to the front door was a full-size Santa in his sleigh, pulled by eight nodding, lit-up reindeer.

“Oh my,” Courtney said, her voice breathless. “Remind me not to show them my tiny plastic tree. I have décor envy.”

“You’re one up on me. I didn’t even bother to put any decorations up.”

The corner of her lip quirked up. “You’re a philistine.”

“I’m just being green. Plastic trees are bad for the environment.”

“Kind of like giant SUVs?” She arched an eyebrow.

“You got me there.” He grinned. “But at least it’s safe. I don’t like the looks of these clouds.” He glanced out of the window at the grey-and-black colored sky. It looked ominous.

“I don’t either,” Courtney admitted. “I greased up the hens just in case.”

Was it wrong that he loved the way she had a thing for her chickens?

They’d reached the top of the driveway. He turned to the left, pulling into a space next to Tanner’s car.

“You have a big family,” Courtney said, looking around at all the vehicles parked in front of the house. “How many of you are there again?”

“Three brothers and a sister. Gray and Tanner are coupled up, so Maddie and Van will be there. And there’s my dad and Aunt Gina, and Maddie’s family, too.”

“Becca’s the youngest, right?” Courtney’s brows knitted together as though she was trying to remember.

“Yeah. Gray’s the eldest, then a year later came Cam and me. Tanner’s another year younger, and then Becca’s the baby.”

“I thought she was twenty-five.”

“She is.” He shrugged. “But she’s our kid sister.”

“I bet you’re overprotective where she’s concerned.” Courtney couldn’t help but grin at the way his lips twitched.

“She’s been through a lot.” He’d told her about their mom dying when Becca was a tiny child. He and Cam had been nine years old at the time. “We like to take care of her.”

“And I imagine she hates that. Only one thing worse than having an overprotective brother, is having four.” She shrugged. “Not that I have any experience.”

“Yeah, well you’re about to have an experience of a big, overprotective, nosy family. So brace yourself,” he said, his voice playful.

She turned to look at him, her warm gaze meeting his. “I don’t suppose you want to go home and curl up with me in front of the fire?”

He reached out, cupping her jaw with his hand. Her eyes looked up at his, wide and blue. “There’s nowhere I’d rather be than curled up with you,” he said, his voice rough. “If you want to leave, then let’s go.”

She leaned her head into his hand. He loved the way she looked at him, as though he was everything right now. Slowly, he inclined his head until their lips were only an inch apart. “I mean it,” he murmured, brushing his mouth against hers. It was only a brief touch, yet it sent pleasure racing down his spine.

He was a fool for her. Whenever they were close it was as though all coherent thought fizzled out of his brain, leaving space for only her. The way she looked, the way she sounded, the way she smelled so damn good.

It had been this way from the moment they’d met. And if he was truthful he’d never felt anything like this before. It was almost chemical. Like the strongest drug in the world.

“We can go in,” she said, smiling at him. “It would be rude not to.”

“Sure?”

She nodded. “I’m sure.”

He tried to push down the feeling of disappointment. She was right, he knew she was. But it still didn’t stop him from wanting her right now.

“Okay then. Let’s go.”

---

“THIS IS FOR YOU,” Maddie said, passing Courtney a virgin snowball as she and Logan walked into the sprawling kitchen at the back of the house. Courtney looked around, her breath catching as she took in the expensive appliances and marble worktops. On the other side of the breakfast bar – that could seat ten people without looking cramped – was a den, complete with cream leather sofas, an eighty-inch flat screen television on one wall, and glass doors that led to the garden

beyond. To the left of the den was the dining area, with a table that looked like it would fit another twenty people. Behind it was a floor-to-ceiling Christmas tree – real, of course – covered with ornaments and sparkling lights, topped with an angel.

“Thank you,” Courtney smiled at the only person she knew apart from Logan. “Your house is beautiful.”

“It wasn’t like this two hours ago.” Maddie grimaced. “Usually you can’t walk a yard without tripping over a plastic toy or a kid. I feel exhausted from clearing it all up.”

“Are the twins in bed?”

“My twins?” Maddie clarified. “Yeah. Though I’ve got this just in case.” She pointed down at a monitor that she’d placed on the counter in front of her. “Gray and I have an agreement. I do the first two hours, he does the next two.”

Logan walked up behind her, pressing his palm into the small of her back. “Courtney, this is my older brother, Gray,” he said, introducing the tall, handsome man next to him. He was wearing a pair of dark pants and a white shirt, the collar unbuttoned.

“It’s a pleasure,” he said softly, leaning forward to shake her hand.

Of course she knew who he was. Everybody in America had heard of Gray Hartson. His voice was constantly on the rock and country radio stations, after all.

“Hi,” she said, smiling at him. “I was just saying to Maddie that your house is beautiful. I’m pretty sure you could fit my place neatly into the corner over there.”

Gray laughed. “Logan tells me you live on a farm.”

“I do.” She nodded. “Live and work there.”

“That sounds so romantic,” Maddie said grinning. “Like a movie or something.”

“Believe me, it’s nothing like a movie when the hens launch themselves at you,” Logan told her. “Unless it’s directed by Alfred Hitchcock.”

Courtney shook her head. "I keep telling you, it's because they like you." She turned back to Maddie. "Do you know, whenever Logan visits I get more eggs the next day?"

Logan tipped his head to the side. "You never told me that."

"I didn't want to give you a big head," she teased. But it was true. As well as being the hottest guy she'd ever met, he was great for egg production. Maybe she should get him to leave a shirt or something next time. She could put it in Hester's bed.

"Is that why you keep asking me over?"

She sighed and shook her head. "See what I mean?"

Maddie laughed. "Could I bring the boys over to the farm sometime?" she asked. "They're just getting into animals. I know they'd love to see the chickens."

"Of course. Any time. I'll take you all on a tour." Courtney couldn't help but like Maddie. She was so lovely and welcoming.

"Let me introduce you to the rest of my family," Logan said, inclining his head toward the living area of the kitchen.

"Sure." She smiled at Maddie and Gray. "Thanks again for inviting me."

Maddie squeezed her hand. "We'll talk later."

With his palm still firmly against the small of her back, Logan steered her past the breakfast bar into the main living area. "This is Tanner and Van," he said, introducing her to the couple standing by the sofas. "My younger brother and his wife."

"You run the Chaplin Drive-In, don't you?" she asked, shaking their hands. "The one next to the Cutler farm?"

"Yeah, that's right." Tanner said, smiling warmly. "It's great to meet you. And congratulations on the baby."

"You should come over when we reopen," Van said, brushing her blonde hair over her shoulders. "We just finished

our holiday season, and we take a break until April, but then we'll be back with a bang." She glanced down at Courtney's stomach. The bump was obvious beneath her clingy, red dress. "When is the baby due again?"

"June twenty-fifth," Logan said. Courtney looked up at him, surprised he could remember. The date was ingrained in her thoughts, but surely Logan had only heard it once, when they were at the doctor's office.

Van grinned. "This year we had showings once a week where we encourage babies to come. That was Maddie's idea. Some of her friends from her prenatal classes were afraid their babies' crying would annoy other customers. So we have a special showtime just for them, and the babies can scream to their hearts' content. When we start them again next year, maybe you can come?"

"That's wonderful," Courtney said. Logan's family were all so lovely and welcoming. "I'd love to come."

"I'll get your number from Logan. We'll make it happen," Tanner told her.

"Let's go and meet my dad and Aunt Gina," Logan said, giving Tanner and Van a wink. "They're over here."

Like his brothers and their wives before them, Logan's aunt was welcoming and gracious. His dad was quieter, giving her hand a shake and asking if she was well, before sitting silently and listening as Aunt Gina asked all the questions. Next to them was Maddie's mom, who oohed over all the baby talk.

It was strange seeing how different Logan was, surrounded by his family. His body relaxed against her as his arm circled her waist. He smiled more than she'd ever seen him do before.

This baby growing inside her would be part of it all. Logan would probably bring him or her over here during his parental time. They'd play with Maddie's kids. Climb on the huge wooden swing set in the backyard. Curl up with Aunt Gina and listen to stories.

Courtney's mouth felt dry as she thought about her talk with Lainey. She was right. It would be confusing for Courtney to try to be part of all this. Not just for the baby, but for her, too. And yet part of her yearned to be a member of this huge, friendly family. To pretend that they were her own.

But they weren't. And if she wasn't pregnant, she wouldn't even be standing here right now. She'd be at home, alone, probably watching a Christmas movie.

"This is my brother, Cam. My twin."

Courtney turned to the man standing next to Logan. Even though they had the same face, she could see the differences right away. Not just in Cam's longer hair, and the bump in his nose that Logan told her came from a football injury at school. But it was in the way he looked at her. Oh, he was friendly and open-faced, but the fire she always saw in Logan's eyes wasn't there.

Taking a deep breath, she smiled and looked up at Cam. "It's lovely to finally meet you."

"And you." Logan had warned her that Cam was a man of few words. Though he was lauded on the football field, he was much shyer than his twin, according to Logan.

"Did you fly in today?" she asked him.

"Yesterday. Then I'm back home on Saturday to be ready for a game on Sunday."

"You must travel a lot," she said.

"Yeah. But it's all good." He smiled at her. "How are you doing? My brother giving you any problems?"

"He's behaving," she told him, starting to relax. Of all his family, it was Cam she'd been worried about meeting most. Maybe because he was the closest to Logan. "And he's been treating me well. Sending me pastries every day, which means I'll be the size of a house by the time the baby arrives."

Cam laughed, his eyes crinkling. The sound of it was exactly like Logan's. "He always tries to feed me up, too."



“Nobody needs to try that,” Logan pointed out. “You eat constantly.”

“I use up a lot of calories.” Cam shrugged. “Are you two gonna find out the sex of the baby?”

Courtney’s eyes met Logan’s. “I don’t...”

“It’s up to Courtney.”

They laughed when they both spoke at the same time. “I guess that’s something we need to discuss,” she said, their gazes meeting again.

She’d never met anybody who made her feel so calm, yet so on edge at the same time. Like a sting followed by a kiss. He pressed his fingers into her hip, pulling her closer, and all she wanted to do was to melt into him.

Except he wasn’t hers to melt into. Damn, this *was* confusing.

“Either way, I’ll make sure you get some Boston Bobcats branded baby clothes.” Cam grinned. “Gotta train them young.”

“What if they support a different team?” she asked, her voice full of innocence.

Cam’s mouth dropped open, making Logan laugh uproariously.

“I can see why you like her,” Cam said softly. “She’s got balls.”

The next two hours passed in a blur. She met Becca, and Maddie’s family, as well as tiptoeing upstairs with Gray to peek in on his sleeping sons. There was music, singing, and a whole lot of conversation and teasing. It felt almost like watching a Christmas special on television. She felt part of it and not part of it at the same time.

No wonder she felt so exhausted. By ten o’clock she was sitting on the corner of the sofa, Maddie and Van on one side, Becca on the other. Becca had put a Christmas movie on. A black-and-white James Stewart was on the oversized screen,

splashing into the water beneath the dark bridge he'd been leaning on.

"You okay?" Logan asked, leaning over the back of the sofa to whisper in her ear. All night, he'd been checking in with her, putting his hand softly on her waist, pulling her close to make sure she was happy. She'd be lying to herself if she didn't admit she liked it.

It was so easy to pretend this life could be hers.

"I'm good." She gave him a sleepy smile.

"You look tired. You want me to take you home?"

"You can't take her away now," Becca said, smiling at Courtney. "You only just introduced her."

"It's okay," Courtney said, nodding. "Maybe we'll leave in half an hour or so."

"In that case, let's have some popcorn," Maddie said, standing and stretching her arms. "Gotta feed that baby."

"Sounds good to me." Courtney grinned, trying not to react when Logan pressed his lips against her cheek and kissed her softly.

Yeah. She could get used to this life. If only it was hers to have.

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LOGAN LEANED on the breakfast bar, the sleeves of his dark blue shirt rolled up, a beer resting in his left hand. The vantage point gave him a perfect view of Courtney. She was on the sofa, her legs curled up beneath her, a hand resting on the gentle swell of her stomach. Next to her, Maddie and Van were sharing a bowl of popcorn. On the other, Becca was holding the bowl she'd been sharing with Courtney, though since the mother of his child had fallen asleep, Becca was eating what remained of the popcorn alone.

"I like her," Cam said, following Logan's gaze. "So much better than most of the women you date."

“In that she exists?” Gray said, grinning. It was a running joke that Logan had no time for women.

“I mean it.” Cam took a mouthful of beer, swallowing before he continued. “When you told me she was pregnant I worried she was some kind of gold digger. That she got pregnant on purpose.”

“That’s exactly what she feared. That you’d all think that.”

“Yeah, well I don’t think that now.” Cam shrugged.

“Maddie likes her,” Gray said. “And she’s a good judge of character. Van and Becca, too. If they thought there was something sketchy, they wouldn’t be sitting with her like that.”

Logan looked over at Courtney again. Her head had lolled to the side. He really needed to take her home, but the thought of it made his chest ache. Because then he’d come back here to celebrate Christmas instead of being with her.

“So what’s going on between you two?” Cam asked, his voice casual.

“What do you mean?” Logan frowned.

“Are you two in a serious relationship? You gonna make it official? I can’t quite figure out what’s happening here.”

Logan sighed, tracing his finger around the mist on his bottle. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “I like her. But there’s no future for us. She’s got a life here, and I’ve got a life in Boston. It couldn’t work between us long term.” And it felt like a kick in the gut to say it. When he was with her, Boston felt like a world away. And now, watching her with his sister and his brothers’ wives, it felt like this should be his life.

But it wasn’t.

“Won’t she move?” Cam asked.

Logan shook his head. “I haven’t asked her. And I wouldn’t. You should see her on the farm. She loves those damn chickens. And there’s her in-laws. They rely on her. I couldn’t drag her away from that.”

“But her husband’s dead, right?” Cam asked.

“Way to be tactful, man.” Gray shook his head.

Logan lifted a brow. “Yeah, he’s been gone for two years. But she’s still close to his parents. From what I can tell, they’re like parents to her, too. Her mom died when she was a kid and she doesn’t see much of her dad.”

“What about the baby?” Gray asked, tipping his head to the side. “How are you gonna manage that with you in Boston and Courtney here?”

“I’ll fly back for my custody time. At least for the first year. After that, we’ll take it from there.” He inhaled deeply, ignoring the strange tug in his chest. “It’s not easy, but I want to make it work. I don’t want the baby growing up not knowing who I am.”

Gray caught his eye, his expression full of sympathy. “That’s gonna be hard on you all.”

“I don’t have a choice,” Logan pointed out. “My business is in Boston. I can’t run it from here full-time. Believe me, I’ve thought about whether it’s possible, but it’s not. It’s taken me years to get it to this place. It’s part of me, too.” And that was the thing keeping him awake at night. Trying to fit all these misshapen pieces of puzzle into the craziness that was his world. None of them wanted to slot in. It was frustrating not being able to solve the problems surrounding him. And then there were all the damn demands on his time.

“She’s a beautiful woman,” Gray said, looking at her sleeping form. “How will you feel if she gets married? Gives your kid a stepdad?”

Logan’s grip on his bottle tightened, his knuckles blanching. “How do you think I’d feel? But I’d have no right to stop her.” The kicker was, he wanted her to be happy.

But he also wanted to be the one to make her feel that way.

“You got a while to sort things out,” Cam murmured. “It’s six months until the baby’s due.”

“And your restaurant’s opening next month,” Gray agreed, giving Cam the slightest of nods. “How’s that going?”

“Good.” Logan pressed his lips together, ignoring the bitter taste in his mouth. “You guys coming out for the opening night?”

“Yep. Maddie’s sister is gonna look after the kids so we can make a weekend of it.” Gray’s face lit up as he spoke.

“And you know I’ll be there. No game that weekend.” Cam patted his brother on the back. “Now stop moping and put a smile on your face. It’s Christmas, and all the family is here. It’s time to start celebrating.”

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“MOVIE’S OVER.” The soft words woke her from her reverie. Courtney blinked her eyes open, aware of warm breath on her cheek. She knew it was Logan without having to look. The way her skin heated up at his proximity was clue enough.

She glanced up at the screen. She’d dozed on and off all through the movie, and now the credits were scrolling up. “What time is it?” she asked.

“Almost midnight. I’ll take you home so you can hang up your stocking.”

She smiled sleepily. “I think I might be too late for that.”

Her whole body ached as she stood, and Logan walked around the sofa to help her. They said their farewells to his family, wishing each other a Merry Christmas, then walked out of the huge, vibrant house into the darkness of Christmas Day.

“I should have taken you home hours ago,” Logan told her as he helped her down the steps toward the SUV he’d rented. “You look beat.”

“I wanted to stay,” she said, her voice thick with exhaustion. “I had a good evening.”

“Yeah.” The corner of his mouth rose up. “I did, too.”

She must have fallen back asleep before he’d even started the engine, because the next thing she knew he was pulling up to the cottage. A dusting of snow remained from the earlier

storm, sparkling in the moonlight. “Stay there,” Logan said, climbing out and walking around to her door. He opened it up, his eyes soft as he held out his hand and helped her to stand.

He was being so gentle with her tonight. She liked it almost as much as when he was bossing her around. Every time she saw him, there was another side of him revealed. Another Logan. And every one of them made her heart ache.

Her shoe caught on a rock in the ground. She stumbled forward, Logan reaching out to catch her in his arms. He slid his arm around her waist, walking her up the steps. “Give me your key,” he said. “I’ll open it up for you.”

She reached into the pocket at the front of her purse and pulled her leather key ring out, passing it to him. Second trimester tiredness felt different to the first. It wasn’t as all-encompassing, but when it came, she felt it to the bones. She was lucky he was next to her, his arm keeping her up.

When they stepped inside, she could still smell the cinnamon of the pastries he’d had delivered yesterday. She smiled at the reminder of his kindness. “Are you coming in?” she asked, tipping her head up so her eyes caught his. There was a fire in his gaze that pushed down the tiredness.

“I shouldn’t...”

“I know, but I want you to.”

He closed the front door, lowering his head until his brow touched hers. “Fuck it,” he whispered, capturing her lips with his. “I’ll get up early in the morning and head back to Gray’s.”

“I have to be up early, too.” She kissed him back, warm and welcoming, her tired arms wrapping around his neck. “I promise not to keep you awake all night.”

He chuckled, then lifted her up, pulling her against him until her legs wrapped around his waist.

And when they’d worn each other out, and she was laying with her head resting on his naked chest, his hand gently stroking her curls, she found herself whispering drowsily, “I’m so glad you’re going to be this baby’s father.”

He kissed the top of her head, his chest rising sharply as though his breath was catching.

“Yeah.” His voice was graveled. “I’m glad I am, too.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY



Something was screeching. Courtney opened her eyes, frowning as the light of the winter sun dazzled her. It took her a moment to figure out where the hell she was.

In bed. With Logan. On Christmas morning. And her phone was dancing on top of her bed side table. She reached out to pick it up, frowning when she saw Carl's name on the screen. A side glance told her Logan was still fast asleep. Sighing, she accepted the call.

"Hello?"

"We're waiting for you at the church. Where are you?" His voice was short.

She sat up, her brows knitting as she glanced at the clock on the wall. It was almost ten o'clock. How the heck had she slept for so long? Next to her, Logan was still breathing softly, rhythmically, the blanket and sheets wrapped around his waist.

"I overslept," she said, trying to keep her voice quiet. "You should go in without me."

"But we always go to church on Christmas day. It's important to Mom and Dad. They won't sit down until you get here."

Courtney squeezed her eyes shut. The back of her throat felt scratchy and raw at the thought of letting Mary and Ellis down. "I'll come to the house once you're back," she suggested, her voice full of apologies. "Tell them I'm sorry, okay?"



“Is this something to do with *him*?”

She didn't need to ask Carl who he was talking about. She knew from the bitterness in his tone. Maybe he'd even driven down the lane and seen Logan's rental car parked outside. She pressed her lips together, trying to ignore the twinge in her stomach. “I'm just tired, Carl. It's been a long week, and I was out late last night.”

“I guess we're not important to you anymore.”

“That's not true.” Her voice rose up, making Logan's eyes shoot open. He frowned, lifting himself up on his side to look at her.

She pointed at her phone and grimaced. He nodded in understanding.

“Is he still there?” Carl asked.

Her guts twisted all over again. “Carl, please...”

“Damn it, Courtney. One trip to church, that's all Mom and Dad wanted. One day to think about Shaun and spend some time with you. And you're in bed with some guy who knocked you up. In *Shaun's* house.”

Tears stung at her eyes. The thought of letting Ellis and Mary down made her heart ache. They didn't deserve it, not after all they'd been through.

*What about what you've been through?*

She shook her head at the voice in her head. Because she wouldn't let herself think like that. Shaun's death had been horrific, but she had a future now. But Ellis and Mary would never get over his loss.

“I'll tell them you'll meet them at the big house,” Carl said, sighing. “Don't let them down again. They don't deserve it.”

It was as though he could read her darkest thoughts. “I'll be there,” she promised. Carl ended the call, and she put the phone back on the table.

“You okay?” Logan asked, his voice thick with sleep.

She made herself smile. “I’m fine,” she said, her voice bright. “I guess we overslept.”

The corner of his mouth quirked up. “I guess we did.” Reaching for her, he pulled her down until his lips were warm against hers. “Merry Christmas,” he whispered, his mouth moving against hers.

“Merry Christmas,” she said, closing her eyes as he began to kiss her, pushing her back on the bed and covering her body with his.

Why was it that just being with him made everything seem right, even though she knew it was wrong?

She had no idea, but she kissed him back anyway.

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IT WAS RAINING by the time Logan left for his brother’s house right after eleven that morning. Courtney checked on the chickens, topping up their feed, before piling gifts onto the passenger seat of her rusty red truck, and driving around the perimeter road to Mary and Ellis’s farmhouse.

She’d spent every Christmas here since marrying Shaun. It wasn’t as though she had any other family to visit, with her mom passing years before, and her dad remarried and living far away.

Pulling up, she looked out of the windshield. A curtain of drizzle half-obscurd the old house. The two-storied fascia was covered with white-painted boards, some peeling to reveal the bare wood beneath. A grey-tiled porch overhung the front steps, as long as the house itself. She knew that in the summer Mary would sit on the rocking chair and crochet as Ellis finished up his chores.

Climbing out of the cab, Courtney ran around the front of the truck, holding her hand above her head in a vain attempt to ward off the rain. She leaned into the passenger seat and slid her hands beneath the pile of gifts, then kicked the door closed as she hurried up the steps to the front door.

Like Courtney, Mary and Ellis rarely locked their front door. Courtney wasn't even sure if they had a key to it. There was always somebody home, usually Mary. And in the summer, Ellis would be within hollering distance in the fields.

Still, she knocked anyway, wary of surprising them. Ellis's low voice called out for her to come in, and she pushed the handle down with her elbow, her arms still full of gifts, and hitched her hip against the wood, the door opening with a creak.

"It's me," she called out.

"Come in," Mary pushed herself up from the old wing-back chair by the fireplace, a warm smile on her face. "Get yourself in out of that rain. It started as we came out of church. Carl made us wait beneath the awning while he drove around to pick us up."

Courtney put the gifts she was carrying on the coffee table in the center of the room. Like everything else in here, it was old. When they'd first married, Shaun had told her the farmhouse hadn't been decorated since before Ellis brought Mary home as his wife. They were too busy working in the summer, and in the winter nobody had the desire to be painting or wallpapering.

And yet there was something so homely about it. The threadbare couch was covered with quilts Mary had stitched over the years, and every table bore the rings and scratches from generations of Roberts who had farmed here. It was like a piece of living history – something Courtney never had until she'd arrived in Hartson's Creek.

"I'm so sorry I missed church," Courtney said, hugging Mary tight. "I overslept." It was the truth, even if she still felt bad saying it.

"Oh sweetie, there's no need to apologize." Mary hugged her back. "I remember how hard it is being pregnant. Both times I slept more than I was awake." She stepped back, wrapping her hand around Courtney's. "Now you sit down next to the fire and warm up. I'll make you a warm drink."

“I can help.”

“Oh no you don’t. Now do as you’re told and put your feet up.” Mary’s voice was firm. “Ellis!” she called out. “Courtney’s here.”

“Is Carl here?” Courtney looked around for signs of their son.

“He’s on shift this afternoon, so he headed home to get changed,” Mary told her.

Courtney breathed out softly, relaxing back into the chair. The fire was crackling next to her, the occasional ember spitting out onto the hearth. It was a relief not to see Carl, as awful as that sounded. She didn’t have the patience for his pointed remarks today.

“Merry Christmas,” Ellis said, walking into the living room. He was wearing his best Sunday clothes, a tie knotted around his starched collar. He ran a finger under it, as though it was beyond uncomfortable. It was rare to see him in anything other than his work clothes – thick twill pants and warm sweaters in winter, or thinner pants and a short-sleeved open-neck shirt in summer. Like Shaun, he was wiry, his body slim and surprisingly lithe for a man his age. He reached down to hug Courtney, and she hugged him back.

“One hot chocolate,” Mary said, walking back in with a tray. “And I brought you coffee, honey.”

“Much appreciated.” Ellis nodded, passing Courtney her mug before taking his own. “Let’s drink to a peaceful Christmas.”

“A peaceful Christmas,” Courtney said, smiling at them both.

“Oh, I have something for you.” Mary put her own mug on the table and walked over to the tree. “I know we usually exchange gifts after lunch, but this one is special. An extra one.” She picked up a large rectangular package, the wrapping rustling as she carried it over.

Courtney grinned up at her. “What is it?”

“Open it and see.”

It was soft and light, whatever it was. She pulled the bow to release it, then picked at the tape until the paper came away easily. Beneath the wrapping was a folded quilt. She opened it up, her mouth dry as she took in the embroidered squares. Each one depicted a different farm animal, their name stitched beneath. The quilting fabric was yellow, neutral, for a girl or a boy.

“I wasn’t sure what your nursery theme would be,” Mary said softly. “But I figure animals always work, right?”

Courtney couldn’t stop looking at it. As with all of Mary’s needlework, it was intricately beautiful. She knew from experience that it must have taken weeks for her to make it look this perfect. “When did you find time to make this?” she asked her.

“I’ve had the squares for a while,” Mary admitted, her face reddening. “I guess I always hoped I’d have a grandbaby one day. And when we heard your news, I dug them out and found this fabric. Ellis helped me put it all together on the days when my fingers were a little clumsy.”

Tears spilled from Courtney’s eyes. “It’s so beautiful,” she said, her voice thick as she wiped them away with the backs of her hands. “I’m sorry for being so emotional. I didn’t expect this. It’s like an heirloom.” She looked up at them, smiling even though the tears still streamed. “Shouldn’t you save it in case Carl has a baby?”

Mary’s eyes softened. “Oh sweetheart, no. I want to give it to my first grandbaby. And as far as I’m concerned, that’s the little one growing inside of you right now.” She looked down at the quilt on Courtney’s lap. “You’re as much a daughter to us as Carl is a son. And we want to be this baby’s grandparents, if you’ll have us.”

“Of course I will.” She felt so blessed to have them on her side. “I can’t think of anybody who’d make better grandparents than you two.”

Ellis cleared his throat, looking to the side. It didn't stop her from catching the way his eyes were watering, too.

"We should have some Christmas music," he mumbled, walking over to the old stereo, and flicking through the CDs he had there. "It's supposed to be a happy time."

Mary caught Courtney's eye and they both smiled. "Of course, dear," Mary called out. "And I'll go check on the lunch, make sure it's doing okay."

"I'll help you," Courtney said, lifting the quilt gently as she went to stand.

"Oh no you won't. You sit there and be waited on for once," Mary insisted. "This year we get to spoil you, and next year we get to spoil the baby." She nodded, her eyes glowing. "I've waited a long time to see some new life in this place, and I can't tell you how happy it makes me."

Courtney nodded, her lips pressed together because she was afraid she'd sob if she opened them. Funny how happiness always made her cry. Sadness did, too, of course, and they'd all had too much of that in the past few years. She looked down at the quilt again, her heart filling up. It was the first gift she'd received for the baby, and she knew it would always be treasured.

It was so strange how she'd gone from feeling lonely, to being surrounded by a crowd of people who wanted to be part of this new life. Ellis and Mary, Logan and his family, Lainey and Maddie... even Carl in his own strange way.

Over the sound of Bing Crosby's crooning, she heard Ellis's deep voice coming from the kitchen, followed by Mary's giggle. She couldn't remember the last time she'd heard Mary laugh.

Blinking back the tears, because there had been way too many of them in the past few years, she carefully folded the quilt and rested it back on her lap.

She only wanted happy thoughts from now on.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



“So I’ve been thinking,” Cam said, as he and Logan walked toward the airport departure zone.

“Always dangerous,” Logan said, biting down a grin. Cam glared in return.

It was the morning after Christmas, and Cam had to catch a flight back to Boston for his game the following day. Logan had offered to drive him to the airport. It wasn’t often the two of them got to spend any time together, especially during football season. With the restaurant, and now the baby coming, Logan’s own spare time was virtually non-existent.

It was good to have an hour to sit next to his twin brother.

“Okay, I’ll bite. What were you thinking?” Logan asked as they walked through the large revolving door, Cam wheeling his case behind him.

“You should definitely buy a place here.”

“In Hartson’s Creek?”

Cam nodded. “Yeah. You said yourself you’ll be spending a lot more time here after the baby’s born. And I can’t imagine you’ll want to stay with Dad and Aunt Gina, or Tanner or Gray every time you visit your kid. Plus it will give the baby some stability, you know?”

Logan blinked at his brother’s words. Cam wasn’t the advice giving type. He’s always said he was too busy making his own way to comment on anybody else’s life.

“Was this your idea?” he asked Cam, suspiciously.

“I might have been talking to Gray and Tanner.” Cam shrugged. “But it makes sense. And it’s a good investment. Look at Tanner, he’s buying places all over town.”

“Tanner has a lot of time on his hands,” Logan pointed out. “And a lot of money.”

“You’re not exactly wanting for cash,” Cam said, his voice teasing as he looked up at the monitors overhead. “I need to go to desk twenty-eight,” he said, grabbing his case again. “You wanna say goodbye here?”

“I’ll come with you.” Logan’s mind was ticking. Cam was right, he did need a base in his home town. Somewhere big enough for the baby and maybe some room to grow.

Maybe even big enough for Courtney to stay with him, too.

“Lemme go check in,” Cam said as they reached the first class desk. “I’ll be five minutes.”

“Okay.” Logan watched his brother walk over to where a smiling man in uniform was waiting to welcome him, though his mind was still on other things. He’d called Courtney late last night to make sure things were okay, and she’d been upbeat, telling him she was shopping with Maddie this morning,

It was weird how happy it made him that his family seemed to like her almost as much as he did. Even weirder that he kept picturing her and their baby in the kitchen of his non-existent house.

“I’m all set.” Cam walked back to Logan, his papers in his hand. “You got that look on your face, bro.”

“What look?” Logan asked, his brows knitting.

“The one where you’re making plans. I know it too well.”

Logan ran his finger along the line of his jaw. “Do you think Tanner will do some house hunting for me?” he asked.

Cam smiled. “He’s already doing it. You should have a shortlist this week.”



It was impossible not to laugh at his brother's shit-eating grin. Logan shook his head. "I should have known."

"Yep you should've. And be thankful I persuaded Gray not to build another house on his own land. I figured you'd like a little privacy from our damn family now and again." Cam shrugged. "Though I'm hoping to use your place when I visit."

"Mi casa es su casa, bro. You know that," Logan told him. They'd reached the line for security. The fast-track was empty, a man standing in front of the exclusive cordon. "I guess this is where we say goodbye."

"Take it easy." Cam hugged him. "And I'll see you at the restaurant opening, if not before."

"Yeah, you sure will." Logan gave his brother a grin. "Kick some ass on the field tomorrow."

"I'm planning on it." Cam lifted his hand in a wave, then turned and walked toward the security gate. Logan watched him for a moment, then turned to walk back to the parking lot where he'd left the SUV.

His head was full of house buying, babies, and opening his restaurant. Not to mention a certain farm girl with a wicked smile that made him want to be inside of her all the damn time.

He had a lot to think about.

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"WHOA, who knew babies needed so many things?" Courtney asked, staring at the app on her phone. She and Maddie had been wandering around the baby store at the mall outside of Maple Cross, adding things to the registry Courtney had created. "Will I really use a wipe warmer? Isn't that setting the poor kid's expectations too high?"

Maddie laughed. "When I was pregnant, Gray insisted on buying this amazing baby bath. It has lights and jets and all these things that nobody needs. The first time we used it, Presley cried so much I promised him I'd never put him

through that again. So now when it's bath time, Gray strips off and climbs into our tub, and I hand him the twins one by one. It's like a production line." She shook her head. "So no, you probably don't need half the stuff everybody says you do. But people like to buy things so you'll need to put some of it on your registry."

Courtney nodded, deleting the wipe warmer from the app. It was so refreshing to have Maddie with her, telling her the truth. And according to Maddie, it was just as much fun for her. "I get to shop vicariously through you, and have a break from all my boys. It's a win," she told Courtney when she'd picked her up from the farm.

"I guess I'll need a bathtub," Courtney said. "I won't have anybody to climb into the tub naked for me." Let alone a hot Hartson man. Another little reminder of how different her life would be from the majority of moms she'd meet at prenatal classes.

"Yeah, I guess it'll be hard for Logan to help when he's in Boston." Maddie bit her lip, her eyes soft as she looked at Courtney. "Sorry, would you rather we didn't talk about him?"

"No, it's okay," Courtney reassured her, as the two of them wandered toward the registry desk. "And you're right, it'll be just me and the baby for the majority of the time."

Maddie's smile was sympathetic. "That will be hard on you."

"Ah, I can shave a sheep single handed. And I've played midwife to more pigs than I can count. I'm pretty sure this little one will be simple in comparison." She rubbed her stomach and grinned back. No point in admitting any fears, they grew if you acknowledged them. Better to be positive and think only good thoughts. That way they might come true.

"Can I ask you something?" Maddie said, her head tipped to the side.

"Sure." Courtney nodded.

"Feel free to tell me to mind my own business, but I was wondering if you and Logan were a couple or not." She

grimaced. “Ugh, I sound like my nosey sister, but I don’t want to upset you in any way. Like addressing a congratulations card to both of you when I should send two separately.” She sighed. “Sorry, I *am* being nosey, aren’t I?”

Courtney softened at Maddie’s obvious discomfort. “It’s okay, honestly. I’d be wondering the same thing in your position. And the truth is, it’s complicated. I like Logan a lot, and obviously having a baby together means we’re connected forever. But his life is in Boston and mine is here.”

“What if he lived here?” Maddie asked her, picking up a blister pack of pacifiers. “By the way, you’ll need a heck of a lot of these. The baby will be half-Hartson and they’re loud as hell.”

Courtney grinned. “I guess if Logan lived here, and he was interested in something more, then I would be.”

Maddie looked up. “Have you told him that?”

“No. And I wasn’t planning to. It sounds an awful lot like asking too much. I’ve heard him talk about the restaurant business. It’s important to him.”

“It is. Sometimes too important. He works so damn much it’s crazy. Gray always complains about Logan’s schedule. Claims it’s worse than Cam’s, and his is bad.” Maddie sighed. “He’s always had something to prove. I guess that’s what losing his career did to him.”

“You mean his football injury?”

Maddie’s eyes widened. “He told you about that?”

“Yeah. Said he blew his knee when he was in high school.”

“He was such a good player. Better than Cam, if you can imagine that.” Maddie’s voice was soft. “I don’t remember a whole lot about it, because I’m younger than them. But Gray tells me it took a long, long time for Logan to recover both mentally and physically. Not so much from losing his planned career, but because it meant his life would be completely different from Cam’s. Up until then, they’d always been the twins who excelled at football, but suddenly Logan wasn’t part of it anymore.” She ran the tip of her tongue along her bottom

lip. “That’s why Gray’s adamant that we make sure Presley and Marley have different interests. He never wants to watch them go through what Logan did.”

“It sounds like Logan always feels he has to prove himself.” Courtney frowned. That was crazy, because he was so damn successful.

Maddie looked pensive. “It’s as if he feels that he’s nothing unless he’s successful. And I don’t think it’s because he’s jealous of Cam. It’s just that he had to have this constant drive to succeed, otherwise he’d have succumbed to the depression he had after his injury. It was like a fight or flight thing, and he decided to fight.” Maddie pressed her lips together. “And the stupid thing is, he knows all this. Of all the brothers, Logan is the most emotionally intelligent. He’s gone through therapy, he believes in talking things out. And when one of his brothers is in trouble, he’s always the voice of reason.”

“Maybe he finds it easier to give advice than to take his own,” Courtney said. She knew how that felt. It was another thing that tied them together, as if there weren’t enough things already. Her brows knit together as she remembered the first time they met. He exuded confidence and success, the way she probably exuded small town farm girl. It had been one of the things that attracted her to him.

But he was more than that self-assured veneer. And it made her want to know him even more. He was real. Human. The one man who kept her awake at night even when they weren’t together.

And when they were? He was the flame to her firework.

“I think we’ve gathered enough items for today,” Maddie said, her warm eyes meeting Courtney’s. “Let’s go close out the registry, then we can head to this amazing coffee shop I know. They make these huge cupcakes and fill them with melted chocolate, and top them with whipped cream. Once you taste one you won’t want to stop.

Courtney grinned. “You’re a woman after my own heart.” Her smile widened as Maddie slid her arm through Courtney’s, and together they walked toward the registry desk.

Maddie nodded. “That’s why I knew we’d get along so well.”

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“I CAN’T BELIEVE I have to fly back tomorrow,” Logan told Courtney later the following evening when she was laying in his arms. “It feels like I just got here.”

She turned to look at him, resting her chin on his bare chest. “I wish you didn’t have to go”

He breathed out heavily. “So do I. But we’ve got less than a month until the restaurant opens and nothing is ready. And we’re getting some exclusive coverage in *Boston Life Magazine*, which means it all has to be perfect.”

“Exclusive coverage sounds important.” She smiled at him. “And that’s good, right? The more publicity the better.”

“It is,” he agreed. “But it also means more hard work. I don’t think I’m gonna make it back here before the restaurant opens.” He sighed. “Sorry, you don’t want to hear me bitching about stuff that’s not important.”

“It’s important to you, so that’s enough for me.” She looked up at him through her thick lashes. “And I should know what your life is like out there, because it’ll be this baby’s life, too.”

Logan said nothing for a moment. His brows pulled together as he stared into space. Had she said something wrong? Courtney swallowed hard. “Sorry, was that too much? I know you have tons going on with the restaurant and the baby. Sometimes I open my mouth and words just spew out.”

The corner of his lip lifted. “No, it’s not you. It’s me. I’ve just been thinking over some stuff.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked softly, deciding it was stupid to keep silent. Talking was always better than keeping quiet.

“Yeah,” he said, lifting his hand to stroke her dark curls. “I think I do.” He swallowed hard, his eyes still staring into the distance. “I’m confused about what I want.”

“That’s understandable. You’re in a confusing situation.”

His laugh was short. “Yeah, you could say that.” He brought his gaze to hers. “I guess we both are, right?”

She nodded, sliding her hand until it was pressed against his chest. It was strange how much she loved these tender moments with him. They were the perfect ending to the hot needy sex they always shared. Both of them seemed to fill her in a way nothing else could.

“How would you feel if I spent more time here than I’d planned?” he asked, his brows dipping all over again. “I want to move here. To be with you and the baby, and I have no idea how to do that, but somehow I need to make it happen.”

“You want to be here with us?” she repeated, trying to understand what he meant. “Like friends?”

He shook his head. “No. I want more. I just don’t know how to get it.” He blinked, his expression softening. For a moment he looked lost. “I guess I should ask you how you feel about that? Do you want to spend more time with me?”

Her chest tightened. “I do.”

“Good.” He breathed out heavily. “That’s a start, right? If we want to be together.”

Her chest flooded with warmth. “Yeah, it’s a start. And you don’t have to look so scared about it.”

This time his laugh was lighter. “I’m not scared. Not of being with you. I’m just wary of letting you down. My business and my money is all in Boston. It’s not something I can easily wrap up.”

“I guess not. And that’s okay.”

“If you were anybody else, I’d ask you to move in with me there. We’d have a good life in Boston. I could give you everything you need.”

“That’s a sweet offer,” she said thickly. “But this is my home. I don’t know anybody but you in Boston, and I know you work crazy hours.” The thought of being alone with the baby in a strange city made her mouth dry up. No farm, no chickens, no friends. “I don’t think I could live like that.”

“Yeah, and I’m not asking you to. I’m just telling you what’s going through my mind.” His muscles felt tense beneath her hand. Like an animal poised to spring.

“Hey,” she said softly, wriggling until her face was inches from Logan’s. She cupped his jaw with her hands, brushing her lips against his. “I’m glad you’re talking to me. I know there’s a lot to think about. But I need you to know one thing, I really want to be with you.”

His lips curled up. “You do?”

She nodded. “I do. And I understand how complicated your life is. The fact you’re even thinking about spending more time here is amazing. And couples juggle stuff like this all the time. Look at the military, how often fathers are stationed abroad when their babies come. You’ll only be a few hours away by plane. You can come here, I can go there. We can make this work.”

“I’d really like you to come out to Boston. See what I do.”

“I’d like that, too. I guess we should do it before I get too big and the farm starts to get busy.”

“How about next week?”

She laughed. “As in a few days’ time?”

“Let me get through New Year’s Eve, then you can come out and I’ll show you around.” He pressed his lips against her jaw. “It’ll give me something to look forward to.”

“Okay.” She wasn’t sure who was more surprised by her answer. Either way, a smile shone from Logan’s face.

He slid his hands down her back, cupping her bare behind. “You’re astounding, you know that?”

She grinned. “Are you talking about my body or my mind?”

“Both.” His eyes were dark. “And by the way, I like you calling us a couple.”

Courtney tipped her head to the side. “Is that what we are?”

He nodded. “Yeah, if you’ll have me. I know we’re doing this all ass backward, but I’d like us to be exclusive. A couple. Whatever the damn phrase kids use nowadays.”

“Don’t ask me. I seem to skip the dating part and go headlong into the baby thing.”

“Yeah, well making babies is pretty hot,” he whispered, sliding his lips along her jaw, nipping her earlobe.

She glanced down at his naked body. He was hard and thick, the way she liked him. “Again?” she whispered, not sure whether to be shocked or elated. It was only ten minutes since they’d been rolling around, their bodies tangled together in a heated mess.

“Again,” he said firmly, kissing her hard. Those two things were all it took to set her on fire. She could never get enough of him. It was like she was programmed to respond to every touch, every word, every kiss he gave her.

And she loved every minute of it.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Logan had no idea how he always ended up being late for the airport. Okay, so he had *some* idea, and she was currently wandering around her front yard, feeding chickens in the coop. It was getting harder to leave her. He stared out of the windshield at the empty road ahead, his head full of Courtney and their baby.

Strange how the thought of their child warmed him inside. It was as though the knowledge had changed him. Made him stronger. Now he knew what was important, and he couldn't wait for the rest of his life to start.

He had a lot of loose ends to sort out before it could begin.

Turning onto the highway, he was so deep in his thoughts that he didn't notice the flashing blue lights. It wasn't until the cruiser was right up his rear that he realized the bright flashes were for him. He sighed, glancing at the speedometer. He was five over at the most. Lifting his hand to acknowledge the officer, he hit the indicator, and put his foot on the break, moving over to the shoulder, before coming to a stop next to a grassy field.

Now he was going to be really late. It was going to be tight. He gritted his teeth, thinking about the meeting with the inspectors he was scheduled to have later that day. If he had to catch a later flight there was no way he'd make it there.

The officer tapped on the driver's window, and Logan lowered it to see Carl Roberts – Courtney's brother-in-law – standing on the other side.

“Sorry,” Logan said, flashing him a smile. No point in looking sore over their last encounter. He’d been stopped before – it was par for the course with the kind of cars he drove in Boston. And he’d learned a smile and an apology worked far better than arguing. “I’m late for my flight. I didn’t realize I was speeding.”

“You were eight miles over the limit.” Carl’s eyes were narrow. “I need your license and registration.”

“Can I grab my wallet?” Logan asked.

Carl nodded, saying nothing.

Logan pulled his license out, passing it to Carl who looked at it carefully. “This is a rental,” Logan told him. “I have the details in the glove compartment.

“You live in Boston,” Carl said, still holding onto the license.

“That’s right.”

“Get out.” Carl stepped back, his dark eyes still on Logan.

“Of the car?” Logan clarified. He’d never had that request before.

“I’m going to need to search it. And give you a breathalyzer. I can smell alcohol.”

“It’s ten in the morning,” Logan protested. “I haven’t drunk anything for days.”

Carl’s smile was sickly. “That’s what most drunks say.” He breathed in through his flared nose. “I’m only going to ask you once more, and then I’ll be arresting you for obstruction. Get out of the car.”

Logan bristled at his tone. “Do I need to call my lawyer?”

“I don’t know, do you? I guess if you have something to hide...”

There was no other option but to climb out. Logan gritted his teeth as he pulled the door open, then followed Carl to the cruiser. Carl pulled the back door open, telling Logan to sit inside, then walked back to Logan’s rental to search it.

As each minute passed, Logan could feel his blood boiling. There was no reason for Carl to search his car. Certainly no reason to go through his damn suitcase. He gritted his teeth as the cop methodically rifled through his clothes, his gifts, even the framed photograph of the baby's ultrasound picture Courtney had given to him for Christmas.

Yeah, Carl took a lot of time staring at that.

Finally, he zipped the case back up and closed the trunk, walking back to the cruiser with a dark expression.

He wrenched the door open, inclining his head for Logan to climb out. "You don't deserve her, you know?"

Logan sighed loudly. "That's none of your business."

"That's where you're wrong. Courtney's definitely my business. She might think you're some kind of hero, but I know exactly what you are. A rich asshole who sweeps in and disrupts everything. You're gonna let her down and break her heart, and guess who'll be here to pick up the pieces? Why don't you do us all a favor and stay in Boston?"

Logan stared at him for a moment, taking in the close-cropped hair, the twisted nose, and watery blue eyes that looked like the creek after a storm. "Courtney's having my baby. I intend to be around for good."

Carl pressed his lips together, his jaw twitching. For a long moment the two men stared at each other, the silence only punctuated by the whistling wind dancing through the roadside trees.

Carl swallowed hard. "You can go now..." he said, his voice low. "But remember this. If you ever hurt her, I'll make sure you fucking regret it. She's a Roberts and she always will be."

Logan lifted a brow. "You know what will hurt her?" he asked, refusing to back down. "People like you deciding what's best for her. She's chosen me. And I'm sorry if that makes you feel like shit, but it's the way it is. And I'm pretty fucking stoked that she's having my baby. So pull me over all you like if it makes you feel better, because that's all you can

do. You can't stop her from being with me, and that's killing you inside." He shrugged. "Now have a nice day, I have a flight to catch."

Logan took his license back from Carl and began to walk away.

"I could make your life hell," Carl called out.

"If you want to lose your job, go ahead." Logan didn't look back. "The next time you stop me you better have a damn good reason for doing so, otherwise I *will* be talking to my attorney."

"In that case, you better watch out," Carl shouted as Logan opened the door to his SUV. "People like you *always* slip up. You think you're better than the rest of us. That the rules don't apply to you."

Gritting his teeth, Logan climbed into the driver's seat, slamming the door behind him. He had nothing else to say to Carl Roberts. The man was fucking power-drunk.

And right now, he needed to get back to Boston.

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"THAT WENT BETTER THAN EXPECTED." Paris pulled the cork from a dusty bottle of expensive Cabernet, as they sat in the almost-finished restaurant a few days later. "I thought they were going to give us more bad news. But now we can really start planning for the opening." She poured them both a glass of the ruby red wine. "Here you go, cheers."

"Cheers." Logan lifted the glass to his lips, savoring the dark fruity bouquet. Though they had a professional who bought all the wines for their restaurants, he still took an interest in the suppliers. Last year, he'd spent a few days at the Crock Ham Estate in California, tasting the results of the previous year's vintage. One of the selling points of their restaurants was their attention to detail. Everything had to be perfect. And they charged accordingly.

“Alicia is coming in tomorrow to finalize the plans for opening night,” Paris said, looking at him over the rim of her glass. Alicia Duvall was their go-to event planner, and a well known figure in the Boston social scene. She and Paris were close friends. “Can you believe it’s only three and a half weeks away? I know we’ve had that date in mind forever, but it feels like we have so much to do.” Paris widened her eyes in mock-surprise. “We have to have the final tasting this weekend. The chef will need that time to make sure he has all the ingredients and train the staff. Shall we do it on Saturday?”

“I’m busy on Saturday.” Logan ran the pad of his finger along his jaw. It was rough from a day’s beard growth. “Courtney’s visiting.”

“As in Courtney, your baby mama?” Paris asked. “Does she even know what an airplane is?”

“Don’t call her that.” Logan frowned. “And of course she knows what a plane is.”

“I wasn’t sure she’d want to leave the exciting town y’all come from.” Paris exaggerated a country drawl. “But you should bring her to the tasting. The more the merrier. I’ll ask a gang as well, get their feedback.” She smiled.

Logan looked at her for a minute, trying to decide whether she was being a bitch or not. “Okay,” he said slowly. “I’ll bring her.”

“Good.” Paris nodded. “It’s about time we met. I’ll get to look her over, show her how busy the restaurant business is. That way when you need to work rather than bathe a screaming baby she’ll understand.”

“About that.” Logan ran his finger around the rim of his half-empty wine glass. “I’m looking for a house to buy in Hartson’s Creek.”

Paris blinked, the smile melting from her lips. “What does that mean?”

“It means I’m planning on spending more time there once the baby comes. Maybe before.” He met her confused gaze.

“You mentioned before about us bringing on another partner. This might be a good time to do it.”

“What the hell are you going to do in bumbfuck Virginia?” Paris asked, incredulous. “You’ll go crazy in about five minutes. There’s a reason you left Hartson’s Creek. You’re too big for that place. You couldn’t run a restaurant like this there,” she said, pointing at the almost-finished furnishings.

“I know that. But I want to spend time with Courtney and our baby when she or he arrives. And I can’t do that from here.”

“She’s hardly into the second trimester,” Paris pointed out. “There’s plenty of time to think about the future.” Putting her glass down on the counter, she sighed. “Look, there’s no way we can find someone to buy into the business until this place is up and running. They’ll want to see the accounts, a profit, all of that stuff. And besides, neither of us has time to look for the right person right now.” She tipped her head to the side, her eyes scanning Logan’s face. “How about we revisit this after the restaurant is open. If you still want to do it, then we’ll start looking.” She shrugged. “Though I think you’re crazy.”

Everything she said made sense. Apart from the crazy part. “Okay, we’ll revisit then,” he agreed, though he knew he wouldn’t change his mind. He was already counting down the time until he could hold Courtney in his arms again. Next weekend. That’s all the time he had to wait until he could bury his face in her fragrant curls. Until he could press his body against hers until everything in his life made sense again.

“Good.” Paris finished her wine. “Now come on. We’ve got work to do.”

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THE LAST TIME Courtney had been on an airplane was when she was eighteen, right after graduating from high school. She’d flown to upstate New York to be a camp counselor. She could still remember the feeling of intense excitement, peppered with anxiety as she walked through the terminal.

She'd been almost surprised to see her case going around the carousel. She was certain it would be lost somewhere along the way. She was even more surprised to see an older man waiting for her once she'd walked through the gates, holding a sign with five names written on it, including her own.

She felt a similar feeling when she saw Logan waiting for her on the other side of the doors. He was wearing a dark blue suit and lighter striped shirt, his phone in one hand as he scanned the incoming arrivals.

As soon as he saw her, his lips lifted into a grin. He shoved his phone into his pocket and raised his hand, and she found herself smiling back at him.

"Hey," he said when she reached him. He kissed her cheek, his lips soft. "How was your flight?"

"It went quick," she told him as he took the handle of her suitcase. "It felt like I barely sat down before we landed. I didn't even get a chance to finish my book." She patted her purse, where she'd put the paperback when the pilot announced their descent. "Hopefully I will on the way back."

He hooked his arm around her waist, leading her toward the exit. "I thought we'd drop your things off at my apartment first. Then we can head somewhere for dinner." God, he smelled good. Warm and woodsy and so very Logan. She loved the way she could feel his warm skin through his thin shirt when she slid her hand beneath his jacket.

"My car's in the lot," he said, as they walked through the glass doors. "And you probably shouldn't move your hand any more, or I'll end up taking you against the terminal wall."

She laughed. "Is it wrong that I want you to?"

He moved his hand up, his deft fingers feathering her neck. "Not wrong, no. But potentially illegal."

"I guess we should avoid jail for the weekend."

"I'm thinking so." He tipped his head until his eyes met hers. "My place is only twenty minutes away. I think we can manage."

She lifted an eyebrow. “What is this magic? Every time I see you it’s like there’s this magnet inside me. Is that normal?”

He shook his head. “I’ve never felt it before.”

Her gaze locked with his. “Me either.”

Surprise washed over his features, and this time she was the one doing the mind reading. “Never,” she repeated. Not with Shaun or anybody who came before him. It reminded her of those metal snake eggs she’d won as a kid at the annual fair. She used to pull them apart and they’d rush together again, hitting with a clang. She’d walk around with them in her hand, moving them in her palm. But even as they moved, they didn’t part.

That’s how she felt whenever she was near him. Like there was something deeper than either of them could conceive, pulling them together. As though their meeting on the road last September wasn’t an accident. It was the magnets finally getting tired of staying apart.

An inevitable clash that would change both of their lives.

Logan swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing beneath the taut skin of his throat. There was a dark shadow of beard growth there. She wanted to run her lips along it, let the roughness scrape against her.

She blushed as she thought about his face between her legs.

“Are you thinking about what I’m thinking about?” he asked her, his voice thick.

She exhaled softly, her lips slightly parted. “Yeah,” she breathed. “I think I am.”

He lifted her luggage, as though he didn’t have time to pull it along the blacktop any more. “Come on,” he said, pressing his palm into the small of her back. “Let’s get you back to my place.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Logan held the door open, and Courtney climbed out, grabbing her purse from the floor of his Lexus. She was wearing a black mini-dress with billowing sleeves and a velvet collar that she and Logan had gone out to buy this morning. She hadn't brought anything dressy to wear, and upon hearing that they'd be eating out at his latest restaurant tonight, she'd panicked.

She felt better now, though. The dark fabric skimmed her body, revealing only a hint of the swell that was getting harder to disguise. Her hair was down, gleaming curls tumbling over her shoulders. While Logan had worked on a few things in his home office, she'd spent some time applying the make-up she only wore occasionally, and she liked the result.

Tonight, she felt almost like she belonged in a city like Boston.

"You ready?" Logan asked, his eyes roaming her appreciatively. Like her, he was dressed up, but unlike her it wasn't unusual. She'd never met anybody who rocked dress pants and a shirt like Logan Hartson.

His latest restaurant was a converted warehouse in the seaport district. *On The Water* overlooked the harbor, with views of the stunning Museum of Contemporary Art. Logan had already told her how long it had taken to convert, along with all the hoops they'd had to go through to get it ready to open. She looked at it with wide eyes, taking in the floor-to-ceiling wall of glass that allowed diners to enjoy the view while they ate upmarket American cuisine. Seafood and steak,

is what Logan had described it as, but she knew there was so much more to it than that.

“It’s beautiful,” she told him, turning her head to smile at him. “You must be so excited it’s nearly ready.”

He grinned. “It’s been a long time coming. And we’re fully booked every weekend for the first two months.” He put his hand on the carved metallic handle affixed to the smokey glass door. “Come on, let’s go inside.”

The interior was just as elegant as the outside. Soft lighting illuminated the designer chairs with their low curved backs and buttery-soft cream leather upholstery. The wooden tables were so dark that they almost looked black. Every detail was perfect, from the one-off design of the silverware, to the mock-pony skin covered menus that were propped up on the tables.

“Wow.” Her smile widened as she caught Logan’s eyes.

“You like?”

“I love.”

He grinned. “Come on, let’s go and meet everybody.”

Courtney took a deep breath, trying to ready herself to meet Logan’s business partner and friends. He’d told her about them on the way here. Paris Northman, the main investor and his partner, Ryan Nolan, the head chef, not to mention all the other people he’d met over the years that he’d been involved with the Boston restaurant industry.

For some strange reason, she felt even more nervous than she had meeting his family. At least they’d shared some common background, living in Hartson’s Creek. But here she felt like a fish out of water.

“Logan! You’re here.” A tall, glamorous woman with gleaming dark hair walked toward them. She was wearing the highest heels Courtney had ever seen, but they had no effect on her confident gait. Her dress was molded to her perfect curves. Courtney swallowed hard as the beauty leaned forward to press her ruby red lips against Logan’s cheek. “Ryan’s been asking for you. He has a few questions about tonight. Can you go see him in the kitchen?”

Logan smiled at her. “Sure.” He glanced at Courtney. “Will you be okay here for a minute?”

“Of course she will.” The glamorous woman turned her beaming smile on Courtney. “I’m Paris. You’re Courtney, right? Come with me, I’ll introduce you to everybody.”

She seemed nice. And stunning, too. “Sure,” Courtney nodded. “Let’s go.”

Paris lead the way toward the large table in the center of the restaurant. Ten people were already seated, large crystal glasses of red wine in their hands, their voices loud as they chatted to each other.

“Everybody,” Paris called out. The chattering quieted as they all turned to look at her. “This is Courtney. Logan’s friend.” She frowned. “Is friend right? I have no idea what to call someone who’s not really in a relationship but having a baby.”

“Baby momma,” somebody called out.

“Friend with benefits,” another shouted.

“Let’s stick with friend.” Paris smiled at Courtney again. “And by the way, she has the most amazing accent. Remember how Logan sounded when he first came here?”

“Ah, we rubbed that off him very quickly,” a woman, almost as stunning as Paris, said. “I’m Jorga.” She held her hand out to Courtney. “I used to work for Logan and Paris, but now I own my own place in Back Bay.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Courtney shook her hand firmly.

“Ooh, you’re strong.” Jorga grinned.

“That’s because she works on a farm,” Paris said, pointing at the empty chair next to Jorga. “You sit there, and I’ll be next to you. All girls together.”

“Sure.” Courtney nodded, taking the seat that Paris was pointing at.

“So, you work on a farm?” Jorga asked, her eyes wide. “Like with pigs and animals and stuff?” She sniffed, as though trying to see if Courtney smelled of farm animals.

“I do. Though my father-in-law takes care of most of the livestock.” As soon as she said it, Courtney knew she’d made a mistake. Both Jorga and Paris whipped their heads around to stare at her.

Jorga’s brows knitted together. “Logan’s dad runs a farm?”

“I didn’t know you were married,” Paris said almost at the same time.

“I’m not.” Courtney inhaled sharply. “I mean, I *was*. But my husband died, a couple of years ago.”

“I’m so sorry.” Jorga sounded genuinely sad. “That must have been awful.”

“It’s okay. It was a while ago.” Courtney glanced at the kitchen door, willing Logan to come back.

“But still, losing a husband like that must have had a huge impact,” Paris added, her eyes narrowed as she took Courtney in. “And now you’re pregnant. Another big thing to deal with.”

“Yeah, I guess it is. But I’ve had time to get used to it,” Courtney told her. “I’m ready to be a mom.”

“Well that’s good,” Paris said, giving a little laugh. “Because I can’t see Logan being the best dad.”

Her words felt like a slap to the face. “What do you mean?” Courtney asked.

Paris grimaced. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. It’s not my place.”

“She’s right though,” Jorga leaned in. “He’s such an alpha male. So in control of his life. I can’t even picture him holding a baby.” Her eyes widened. “Imagine spit up on one of his designer suits. It’ll drive him crazy.”

“He’s a neat freak,” Paris agreed.

“Right? Have you seen his apartment?” Jorga asked Courtney. “It’s like a double page spread in *Boston Life*.”

Courtney tried to ignore the twist in her gut. They weren’t saying anything she hadn’t already noticed. “Babies change us all, I guess.” She pressed her lips together. “He’ll get used to it.”

Paris plastered a smile on her lips. “Of course he will. It’s just a shame that he has to leave this behind. He’s worked so hard to build up these restaurants. I’ve never seen a guy who loves his job so much. He eats, drinks, and lives the hospitality business.” She sighed. “There’s going to be a huge hole in his life.”

Courtney closed her eyes for a moment, remembering the excitement on his face as they walked inside this restaurant. He looked so alive it had warmed her heart.

Could he really leave all this behind to move to Hartson’s Creek?

“Can I get you a drink?” one of the wait staff asked her. “We have a wonderful Cabernet Sauvignon I can recommend.”

“I’ll just take some water please,” Courtney told him.

“Sure. We have sparkling, semi sparkling, still, and still with a twist of lemon?”

“Just tap water is fine.”

“You can’t have tap water,” Jorga protested. “Not with food like this. Bring her a Perrier on ice and a slice of lime.”

“It’s okay. I don’t really like fizzy water.” Courtney wrinkled her nose.

Jorga bit down a smile. “I haven’t heard it called fizzy for ages.”

“I’ll bring a bottle of still and sparkling for the table,” the waiter said, as though he felt sorry for her. “Then you can decide.”

Courtney nodded. “Thank you.”

“Everything okay?” Logan asked, walking up from behind. She hadn’t heard the door to the kitchen open, or his footsteps as he approached. No wonder she jumped when he pressed his lips against her cheek.

“Everything’s fine,” she told him, her voice low.

“Great.” Logan smiled, pressing his palm to her shoulder. “We should be bringing out the first courses in a moment. I want you to try a taste of everything. Be honest about what you think, okay? The feedback’s important. We need to get the menu just right.”

The way he was looking at her made her feel better. Like a cool balm to her heated anger. “Of course.” She smiled.

“Everything all right?” Logan frowned.

“Yeah, I just need the bathroom.” She glance down at her stomach. “Occupational hazard.”

He took her arm and they walked over to the heavy teak doors on the far side of the room. “You sure you’re okay?” he asked her, pushing the ladies’ room door open. He slid his other hand down to her stomach, caressing her abdomen.

Just that simple touch was enough to make her body heat up.

“I’m fine. Just getting used to things, that’s all.”

He glanced back to the table, where the starters were being brought out. “Okay.” He pressed his lips to her brow. “I’ll be back at the table. Unless you’d prefer me to wait here?”

He was so damn sweet she could almost taste it. “I’m good. You have a lot to do, please don’t worry about me.”

He kissed her again and walked away, grinning at a tall man who stopped to shake his hand. Her stomach flipped again. He was so relaxed yet in control at the same time. It was a different side of him. One she didn’t get to see in Hartson’s Creek. Logan was in his element.

And he was leaving it all behind for her.

Swallowing hard, she walked into the bathroom, waiting for the door to close behind her before she leaned her brow against the cool, tiled wall. How long did a tasting last anyway?

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



It was past midnight by the time they finally left the restaurant. Logan circled his neck to try to loosen the knots that had formed from leaning over the menu, going through it point by point with Ryan, as they made tiny adjustments and notes, before agreeing on the final product.

The air outside was bitter. A wind had picked up, coming in from the water and whipping against their faces. He slid his arm around Courtney to shield her from the worst of it as he unlocked his car, bending down to open the low-profile passenger door and helping her inside.

When he climbed into the driver's seat, he started the ignition, then leaned forward to turn the heat up to full blast.

"You're quiet," he said. "Was it really boring?"

She turned to catch his eye. Damn, she was so beautiful, sometimes it hurt to look at her. Especially when he needed two hands on the wheel instead of on her body.

"No, not boring," she said. "I was watching you, that was all."

"Should I be worried?" he asked lightly.

She laughed. "I don't think so. You're very good at what you do. Everybody you come into contact with immediately relaxes in your presence. Did you know that?"

He looked out of the windshield as he pulled into the road, a smile playing at his lips. "No, I didn't." He liked the way she



said it, though. It made his stomach twist a little. “I guess I just enjoy what I do.”

“You’ll miss it,” she said. It wasn’t a question.

He nodded. “Yeah, I will. It’s been part of my life for a long time. It’s who I am. You can’t just shrug that off and walk away without it affecting you.” It felt so easy to be honest with her. He wasn’t sure he’d been this open with anybody before. Not even Cam.

“Like with football,” she said softly.

“What do you mean?” He turned left into the parking lot of his apartment building.

“When you got injured and had to stop playing. That had been who you were, too. And you had to reinvent yourself, become this new person with new goals and ambitions.”

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. She was gazing out of the window into the darkness, her face heavy with thought. Swallowing hard at the memories of his injury, he opened the driver’s window and keyed in the code to the underground garage.

“I guess there are some similarities,” he conceded as he drove into the dark lot. “But I’m older now. And there are a few very good compensations for changing direction.” He pulled into his space and put the car into park, turning to look at her. “Like you. And our baby.”

She didn’t look convinced. “I’m worried you’ll regret it.”

“Regret what?” His brows dipped.

“Regret giving this up.” She waved her arm around. “Your life. Your job. Your friends. You can never have something like this in Hartson’s Creek. Sure, you can do something different. Like Dan and Ellie have. But what if you move back home and realize what you’ve lost? And wish you hadn’t.”

“I’m not moving back to Hartson’s Creek to lose something,” he told her, his voice thick. “I’m moving because I want to gain something. You. Our baby. Watching him or her grow up. Don’t get me wrong, this is what I thought I wanted.

And if I could have this and you, then I'd do that. But I can't. I have to make a choice. And I choose you." He pulled his phone from his pocket. "I've even been sent some houses to look at." He reached for his phone. "Want to see?"

"Sure."

He unlocked his phone and scrolled through it, bringing up an image on the screen. She recognized it immediately. "That's one of the new builds on Creek Road." She'd seen the prices, too. A cool million and a half for a house overlooking the water.

"Yeah." He nodded, pulling up the details. "I'm tempted. There's enough room for about a dozen babies." He smiled at her. "Plus us."

"Us?"

"It would be weird for me to have a big house and for you to stay in the cottage. I figured eventually you'd want to move in."

Courtney looked down at her hands. "But I have a house. I work on the farm. It makes sense to live there. And where would I put the chickens in that postage stamp of a garden? Can you imagine the neighbors when they discover you have a coop in there?"

"I wasn't thinking you'd bring the chickens."

Her lips parted as she stared at him. "But they're *my* chickens."

"They can stay on the farm, can't they?" He couldn't understand why she was so worked up about the damn hens. Half the time they drove her crazy. "And you can't expect me to live in the cottage. That's where you lived with Shaun."

Courtney's eyes shone. "I haven't asked you to do that. This is just a surprise, that's all."

Logan sighed. "I didn't mean to shock you. I'm just trying to find a way for this to work for both of us. I want a place that we can both feel comfortable." He sighed. "I'll ask Tanner to send me some places with bigger backyards."

She was still worrying at her lip with her teeth. “Yeah, I guess...”

“You do want to live with me, don’t you?” he asked her.

She brought her gaze onto his. “You haven’t actually asked me. You’ve just assumed.”

He gave her an ‘oh really?’ look. “I lay in your bed at the cottage and have told you I want to be with you. We’re having a baby, Court. I just assumed that would mean us living together. And if you want me to ask you, then I will.” He turned so he was facing her in the car, cupping her jaw with his warm hand. “Courtney Roberts, will you do me the honor of throwing your clothes all over my floor every night? Because you’re the only woman in the world I can see myself being with. I want to be with you and our baby so much.”

She stared at him silently, and he wondered what she was thinking behind those cloudy eyes. His mouth felt dry. Had he said the wrong thing? Put too much pressure on her?

He watched as she pressed the seatbelt clip, unhooking it and shrugging the restraint from her body. Her expression didn’t move an inch as she slowly turned in her seat, then hooked her leg over his, climbing across until she was straddling his thighs.

Her sudden movement took him by surprise. His mouth fell open as she cupped his jaw with both her palms, before she pushed her lips to his, her kiss hot and demanding. “You’re so damn amazing. Do you know that?” she whispered, sliding her hands around his neck. The way she was wriggling on his lap was enough to make him instantly hard. He slid his own palms down her back, fingers feathering her spine until he reached her behind, loving the way it felt so full and heavy.

His lips brushed hers, and he groaned softly as she slid her mouth to his neck, sucking at his skin. Then she was unbuttoning his shirt, sliding her hands along his chest, her fingers grazing his sensitive nipples.

“Court...” It was a sigh and a plea. Her lips curled against his throat as she shuffled again.

“You’re gonna need to move the seat back,” she murmured.

“Here?” he asked. She never ceased to surprise him. Or amaze him, either.

“Here.” She nodded.

He didn’t need telling twice. Leaning down to capture her lips with his once again, he reached for the seat button with his left hand, pressing it until the chair was fully back and reclined.

Then he unbuttoned his pants, groaning again as she slid her hand inside, her warm fingers curling around him.

Any coherent thoughts he had rushed from his brain, leaving only the need she always gave him.

And when she wriggled her panties off and took him inside her sweet, sweet body, he knew he could never get enough of this.



IT WAS ALMOST seven in the morning. Courtney lay on her side, her legs pulled up, her cheek resting on her clasped hands, as she stared at Logan as he slept. She’d been awake for almost an hour. Another side effect of pregnancy nobody had warned her about. Even in the second trimester her sleep was disrupted by sudden wakefulness in the middle of the night, followed by a three a.m. walk to the bathroom that happened like clockwork.

And now she was wide awake, her mind whirring as she thought about last night. Her worries about pulling Logan away from the one thing he loved, and the sweet sound of his words as he told her he chose her over everything else.

His job. His home. His city. His friends.

It still weighed heavy on her. Because the truth was, he wouldn’t be returning to Hartson’s Creek if it wasn’t for her and this baby. She felt guilty, and afraid that he’d decide he’d

made the wrong decision. Sure, he said he hadn't, but who knew how he'd feel in a year's time when they were knee deep in dirty diapers and somebody had to walk out in the snow to feed the chickens?

He was cool. Sophisticated. The city to her country. And she couldn't help but feel like he was sacrificing so much more than she was.

She sighed heavily. Logan's eyes flickered open and his gaze fell on her. "Hey," he said, his voice sleepy as he spoke. "What time is it?"

"Almost seven."

He stretched his arms over his head, the action making the sheets fall to his waist. And yeah, she might have ogled a bit.

Or a lot.

"Can't you sleep?"

"I'm usually starting work by now. Or at least feeding the chickens."

"Do you think they know you're not there?" He was a little more awake now, though his voice was still thick.

"Yep. I'll pay for it tomorrow. Hester doesn't like change. Luckily, she has a soft spot for Ellis. That'll soothe the sting."

"Do you think they'll let you leave them again soon?" he asked.

"Why?" She gave him a curious smile. "I wasn't planning on going anywhere for a while."

"I was hoping you could come to the opening night of the restaurant. As my plus one." He turned on his side, his face a breath away from hers. "I know it's asking a lot, but I really want you here." His lip quirked. "It's my last big thing in Boston, I guess. Gray's hired a private jet to fly them all here. I could ask him to save you a seat."

Her chest tightened. She'd felt so out of place at the tasting yesterday. But he really wasn't asking a lot. Not compared to

what he was giving up. “Yeah,” she told him, nodding. “Let me check with Ellis, make sure that he can cover me again.”

“Have you thought about how you’re gonna juggle working at the farm once the baby arrives?” he asked her.

“I don’t know? Have you thought about how you’re going to juggle the baby with whatever plans you have?” She gave him an arched smile.

“Touché.” He grinned. “I guess we can work that out together.” He reached for her, sliding his finger along her cheekbone. “Doesn’t stop me from feeling a little jealous though,” he admitted.

“About Ellis? I promise I’m not sleeping with my ex-father-in-law.”

He laughed. “No. About Shaun. It’s hard knowing you’ll be working at the farm where you lived with him for all those years.”

“It’s my job,” she told him softly.

“I know.”

“And I don’t know what kind of impression you have of me and Shaun, but it wasn’t exactly marital bliss.”

He blinked as though it was new information. Granted, it probably was. She’d never shared much about her marriage with anybody. Not even Lainey. After Shaun died, it hurt way too much.

But Logan had put himself out there for her. He was giving everything up. She couldn’t let him believe the veneer she showed everybody else.

“I asked him for a divorce the night he died,” she admitted. “I don’t know if I would have gone through with it. And I never will now. But things were so bad between us. I wasn’t sure I could take much more.”

“Bad in what way?”

“He used to drink. A lot.” She breathed in sharply, memories assailing her. “He’d say awful things when he was

drunk. Things that really hurt.”

Logan frowned. “Did he ever hit you?”

She pulled her lip between her teeth. “Only once. He promised not to do it again and he didn’t. But the words...” She blew out a mouthful of air. “They were painful enough.”

“Court... damn.”

“I know.” She inhaled sharply. “The night he died we had a huge argument. He kept telling me we should have a baby. Make it all better. And I told him I’d never have kids with him. It made him so angry. He stalked to the bathroom, found my birth control pills, and flushed them all down the toilet. Then he tried to kiss me.” She grimaced. “And I told him it was over. That I wanted a divorce.”

“What did he do?”

“Threw things around. Ranted. Then he called his brother and left a message for them to meet at a bar.”

“Carl?”

“Yeah, that’s right. But he never made it to the bar. They say it was an accident. That he was tired and fell asleep. And that’s why he drove into the oncoming traffic.” She swallowed hard. “But part of me never believed that.”

“You think he killed himself?”

“I don’t know,” she replied honestly. “But what I do know is it’s my fault. If we hadn’t argued, he wouldn’t have left that night, and he’d still be alive.” Her breath caught in her throat. For so long she’d been afraid to admit it, to herself more than anybody else. It was her fault that Ellis and Mary had lost a son. That they had to manage the farm without his strong hands to help.

There was no way she’d ever leave them to manage the farm for themselves. Not when she was the one who’d caused all the problems.

“He was a drunk. You said it yourself. Him dying wasn’t your fault. The same way it wouldn’t have been your fault if he’d been run over by a bus. He was a grown man. Made his

own decisions. Ones that were nothing to do with you and everything to do with addiction.”

“The end result is the same.” She smiled wanly. “They lost a son.”

Logan reached for her, pulling her close to him, his face against her curls. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I’m sorry he hurt you. And I’m sorry you’re still hurting. But you’re not alone.”

A sob escaped from her throat. The gentleness of his tone, his touch, made her want to bury herself in him. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“For what?”

“For not judging me.”

“I’d never judge you. I’m not a judgey kind of guy.” He slid his arms around her, pressing his lips against her hair. “I can’t believe you’ve beat yourself up for so long about this. Did you ever talk to anybody about it?”

“I went to grief counseling,” she told him. “But I felt like a fraud. It was one of those group things. Everybody else was so devastated at their loss. And though I was too, I also felt so damn guilty. I kept thinking that if they really knew about me, about our arguments, that they’d blame me for his death.” The same way she blamed herself.

“It’s not your fault,” he said again. “People die. I watched my mom leave us and it almost killed me, but I knew it wasn’t my fault.”

She gave a soft nod. “I was the same with my mom. It was awful and overwhelming, but I didn’t feel any guilt. Not like with Shaun.”

“There’s every chance that if he hadn’t died that night, he would have drunk himself to death.” Logan stroked her hair. “And that wouldn’t have been your fault either.”

She knew he was speaking the truth, yet somehow it still didn’t soothe her the way she’d hoped it would. Shaun had wanted what she couldn’t give. One way or another that had led to his death.



“Maybe I’m just really bad at marriage,” she muttered.

He chuckled. “Hey, you’re talking to the biggest relationship loser, remember? You can’t be as bad as me.”

She glanced up at him, cupping her belly with her palm. “This poor kid really lucked out.”

Logan moved his head down, his hazel eyes intent as he brushed his lips against hers. “Our kid really has lucked out having you as a mom. I can’t think of anybody who’ll make a better one.”

She gave him a half smile. “How do you always know the right things to say?”

“I don’t. I wish I did. Most of the time I open my mouth and crap comes spilling out.”

She lifted her hand to cup his cheek. “That’s not true. You’re really insightful. I like that about you. That’s why you’re so good at your job. You anticipate peoples’ needs before they even know what they need.”

His eyes flashed with warmth. “Thank you.”

“And I’m proud of you,” she whispered. “For all your achievements.” She pulled her lip between her teeth. “I’m so glad that Hester ran out in front of your car that day.”

“Not as glad as I am. From the moment that damn hen walked out into the road and stared me down, that was it. It felt like being at the movies and putting 3D glasses on. I went from being a spectator to being part of something real. I’ve never felt that before.” He took her hand, placing it on his chest above where his heart was beating. “You brought me back to life.”

The vehemence in his eyes took her breath away. Her eyes stung at his beautiful words. “We have a lot to thank Harriet and Hester for,” she said softly. “If it hadn’t been for them we might not have met.”

The corner of his lip lifted. “I think they knew you were ready for me.” There was no teasing in his voice. “They just

waited for me to drive along before they flew into the road to stop me.”

“What if you hadn’t stopped?” She bit down a smile. He was looking so serious.

“Then I guess they would’ve known what kind of man I was.”

This time she couldn’t help but grin. There were so many parts of Logan Hartson she was beginning to see. Not just the suave, sophisticated businessman, or the sensual lover who knew all the right places to make her breath catch. There was a softness to him, too. A gentleness she suspected nobody else knew about. And it touched her deep inside.

“I’m glad you stopped,” she said, her voice thick. “I’m even glad that Hester scratched your arm so I had to take you to the cottage. I probably owe her a gilded coop or something.”

“She can be our maid of honor.”

Courtney laughed out loud at the image of Hester in a pink bridesmaid’s dress, her beady eyes on Logan as she walked up the aisle. “I thought we’d talked about that,” she said, her eyes meeting his.

“We have. And I know you’re not ready to get married now. But I also hope you will be one day. I’m going to keep asking in case you are.”

She nodded, her heart too full to say anything. He leaned forward, brushing his lips against hers.

“I’m falling for you,” he murmured against her mouth, his hands sliding down her back. “So damn hard it hurts.”

Her breath caught in her throat. She was falling for him, too. In fact, she’d already fallen. But it didn’t hurt, it felt amazing. Like landing on a cloud. “I feel the same,” she whispered against his lips.

“Thank god.” He slid his palm down to her behind. “Because I don’t think I can live without you.”

She pressed her body against his, feeling every hard line. “You don’t have to.” And wasn’t that the best thing? She’d spent so long believing that she was alone in this world. That her chance at a relationship was long gone. But now, in his arms, she knew better. He moved his lips along her jaw, down her neck, his hands caressing her as he pulled her closer, and all those fears and thoughts rushed out of her, replaced by a pulsing need.

It would be okay. It had to be. Because she couldn’t give this up. She was addicted to Logan Hartson, and from the way he was worshipping her body with his lips, she knew he felt exactly the same way.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Courtney parked her truck outside Ellis and Mary’s house, shivering as she opened the driver’s door. The temperature had dipped again, and today it was ten below zero, even though the afternoon sun could be glimpsed between the low gray clouds.

This weather was good for the soil, at least, even if everything else was suffering. They needed the cold morning frosts to break down the clumps that had been plowed up after the harvest, readying the ground for this year’s sowing.

“Hey.” Ellis lifted a hand in greeting as he walked out of the barn on the other side of the yard. “Was everything all right on the pasture?”

Courtney rubbed her hands together to keep off the chill. “Yeah, I only had to fix one of the fences. But the animals are fine. I’ll bring them in at five, so they avoid the worst of the cold.” She wiggled her fingers, trying to move the blood through them. The tips of her fingers were turning white. “You doing okay?”

Ellis nodded. “Just servicing the tractor. Thought I’d take advantage of a bit of spare time. How was Boston?”

“Colder than this, if you can imagine.” She gave him a soft smile. It felt weird, talking to her deceased husband’s father about her trip to see Logan. “I was thinking about heading back up there in a couple of weeks,” she told him. “The restaurant’s opening night is coming up, and I got an invite.”

She shifted her feet in an attempt to keep her muscles warm. “But only if you think you can cover me.”

“Why don’t we go inside the house and grab some coffee,” Ellis suggested. “Mary can get the planner out. Oh, and your restaurant friends, Ellie and Dan, have asked if they can up their egg order. I’m toying with getting us a few more hens.”

Courtney smiled. Something else to thank Logan for. “Great. Why don’t I do some investigating? Maybe even talk to them about the different type of hens we could get? There are some Marans I like the look of.”

“That sounds good to me,” Ellis said, shuffling toward the house. She walked next to him, trying not to notice the way each step he took looked like it was an effort. He seemed to feel the cold so much more nowadays. It was like it froze all his joints and made walking painful.

The fire was roaring when they walked inside the house. Mary looked up from the kitchen table where she was sewing, a big smile on her face. “Look at you two,” she said, pushing herself to standing. “All bright eyes and rosy cheeks. Sit down and I’ll pour you some coffee.” She inclined her head at the pot. “And I have a cake cooling on the rack.” She pointed at a hearty-looking apple cake. “You want some?”

Courtney smiled. “Yes please.” It was funny how she never turned down cake anymore. She had the baby to thank for that. “Can I help with the coffee?”

Mary frowned, and shook her head. “Oh no, you sit there. This is my domain.” She switched on the coffee pot and pulled out three chipped mugs. “How was Boston?”

“I’ve already asked her that,” Ellis told his wife, giving her a wink. “She said it was good.”

“And did you ask her anything else? Like whether the flight made her feel sick, or if the restaurant was beautiful?” Mary’s eyes met Courtney’s. They were full of humor, as though she was enjoying teasing her husband. “And how is Logan? Did I tell you I saw his aunt at church on Sunday?”

“You haven’t seen her to tell her, you silly old woman,” Ellis muttered. Mary slapped the back of his neck lightly, and he grabbed her hand, pulling her down to kiss her lips.

They had the ease of a couple who’d grown up together. Dating at sixteen, married at eighteen, their first child in their early twenties. They’d been known to complete each others’ sentences on more than one occasion.

“There was something else that I wanted to talk to you about,” Courtney said, when Mary had placed the coffees in front of them, and was slicing up the cake. “I’ve been thinking about selling the cottage and finding somewhere a little bigger.” She took a deep breath, not wanting to hurt them at all. “Logan and I were thinking of buying somewhere together for once the baby’s born.”

Mary looked up, putting the knife down. “I thought you might,” she said. “And that’s a good thing. Babies should be with both parents. Will you be moving to Boston, or a little closer?”

“Oh no, it’ll be close to here. I’ll still come here and work every day,” Courtney told her, taking a sip of the bitter coffee. “You don’t have to worry about that.”

Mary and Ellis exchanged a glance. “We weren’t sure you’d want to continue after the baby comes. You’re going to have a lot of things to juggle then.” Mary looked back at Courtney. “Please don’t feel like you need to do that on our account. I’ve taken a look at the numbers, if we scrimp on a few things we can afford to pay for extra help.”

They couldn’t. Not for more than the few weeks to cover her maternity leave. Courtney knew that from looking at the accounts herself. “No,” she said quickly. “There’s no need for that. Though we might need to hire a temporary worker for a few weeks after I’ve had the baby, I’m planning to be back and working after that. I’ll bring the baby with me, or look for some childcare.”

“You’d be more than welcome to leave the baby here,” Mary told her. “We still have Carl and Shaun’s old crib somewhere. And it would be easy to stop in and feed him or

her if you needed to.” Mary smiled at her warmly. “And I know I’d enjoy having a little baby around.”

“You’d do that?” Courtney felt her throat tighten.

“Of course. It’s important that you trust whoever looks after your little one. And this way you’ll be able to pop in all the time. We can even decorate the spare bedroom if you want. Make it feel all homey and nice.”

Another reminder of what good people Mary and Ellis were. Embracing the baby that had no blood tie to them. This was why she’d always do whatever she could for them. Why she’d work for them while taking as little pay as she could get away with.

“That sounds wonderful.” She gave them a warm smile. “Thank you.”

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COURTNEY SWITCHED off the television and stood, rolling her shoulders to loosen the tightness in her muscles from two hours of sleeping on the sofa when she should have been in bed. It had been almost a week since she’d been in Boston. A week of late night phone calls from Logan, when he called during stolen moments in his car, or while visiting one of his restaurants. Yesterday he’d called her early in the morning, just after six, his voice low and warm. She’d fed the chickens with a smile on her face that morning. One that only he could put on her lips.

Crazy how much she was already missing him.

At nearly sixteen weeks pregnant, and it wasn’t only her stomach that was growing bigger. Her heart felt swollen, too, whenever she thought of Logan. But she felt good. Really good. Enough for Lainey to ask her the other day if she’d been seeing another beautician.

“No.” Courtney had grinned at her friend. “You know I love you, baby. I’d never cheat on you.”

“Good. Because those curls are all mine,” Lainey had replied, her eyes flashing. “Any other stylist lays their hands on them and I’ll chop their fingers off.”

Grinning at the memory, Courtney went to flick off the living room lights, but a banging on the door froze her hand in place. She frowned, glancing at the thin watch on her wrist.

It was almost ten o’clock at night. And people rarely stopped by after seven around here, at least not without calling. It was seen as the height of bad manners. A strange pull in her stomach made her put the never-used chain across the door before opening it, her brows pulling together when she saw who was there.

“Carl?” she said softly. He was still in his uniform, his hat in his hands. “Is everything okay?”

“I just got off shift. Can I come in?”

She hadn’t seen him for weeks. Hadn’t spoken to him since that bitter exchange at Christmas. “Sure,” she said, closing the door enough to unhook the chain. When she opened it, he stepped inside.

“Would you like something to drink?” she asked politely. “I have some lemonade in the refrigerator. Or I can make something warmer?”

He looked her up and down, taking in the swell of her stomach where it rose out of her maternity pants. “No,” he said, his voice low. “I’ll only be a few minutes.”

“Then let’s sit down,” she suggested. “My whole body aches. I’m not sure if it’s work or the baby. Probably both.”

“Are you well?” he asked her. “Is the baby doing okay?”

She felt a wave of warmth at the fact he’d even asked. “Yeah.” She nodded. “We’re both good.”

They sat on the sofa, a small gap between them. Closer up, she could see the dark shadows beneath his eyes. “Was it a bad shift?” she asked, knowing how terrible some of the things he had to deal with were.



Like the day he'd had to watch them pull his brother's body from the car wreck.

"A domestic incident that we'll never be able to solve without somebody getting killed," he said, rubbing the heel of his hands across his eyes. "And an old woman who, from the kindness of her heart, took in a kid only to have him steal her life savings."

"People are assholes." She gave him a sympathetic smile.

"Sure are." He cleared his throat, his eyes landing on hers. "Mom tells me you're thinking of selling this place."

She felt that tug again. "Yeah. Nothing's solid yet, but I'm looking into it."

He nodded, running his hand across his smooth chin. "Are you moving in with *him*?"

When she opened her lips to answer, she could feel her heart slam against her ribcage. "Yes," she said. "I am."

He closed his eyes, inhaling sharply. "You don't need to do that."

"What do you mean?" Her brows tugged together. "I'm not doing it out of need. It makes sense, for me and the baby."

"Makes sense to put yourself at his mercy?"

Courtney couldn't help but laugh at that. "At his mercy? That's what you think?"

"I don't know what to think. You've completely changed, Court, and it's his fault. You would never have put this place up for sale if it wasn't for him. You wouldn't be pregnant either. It's like he has this hold on you, and I hate the way it's making you act. He's no good for you." His gaze flickered down at her stomach. "For either of you."

She had no idea what to say. Looking into his eyes she could see the hurt there, and it hurt her, too. No matter how angry she'd gotten with him when he'd hit Logan, she also knew he'd done it from a place of pain.

“Just because I’m moving doesn’t mean I’m leaving the farm. Or the family.” She ran her tongue along her dry lips. “Or that I’ve forgotten Shaun.”

Carl swallowed hard. “The day we laid him in the ground, I made a promise that I’d always look after you. And I’ve failed. If he’s watching now, and I’m goddamned praying he isn’t, he must hate me.”

Her throat tightened. “You *have* looked after me. All of you. And Shaun would know that.”

Carl pressed his lips together, shaking his head. “No I haven’t,” he said, his voice cracking. “I’ve let you become this.” He gestured at her. “I’ve let this big city guy come and take you away from everything that’s important. You’re leaving the house Shaun left you, Court. The same house you’ve lived in since he brought you home. It’s like you don’t give a fuck about it any more.”

“Of course I care. But I need to move on.”

“With Logan Hartson.” His voice was harsh.

She took a deep breath. “Yes with him.”

Carl blinked. Were his eyes shining? “You’re a damn fool.”

“I know you mean well, Carl, but I don’t need you to watch out for me. I’m a grown woman. I know what I’m doing.”

“Are you sure? Because where I’m sitting I see you making a big fucking mistake. Did you know I stopped him for speeding a couple of weeks ago?”

Courtney looked up, surprised. “No, I didn’t know that.” Her face flushed.

“He was probably too embarrassed to admit it. Made some stupid excuse about needing to catch a flight. What about the next time, Court? What if the baby’s in the car with him? Do you even know this guy?”

“Carl, I...”

“Just think about what you’re doing. For me. For Shaun. Think about Mom and Dad, too. We need you, Court. You’re the glue that keeps us ticking since we lost Shaun. And now we’re losing you, too.”

Her eyes widened as a sob escaped his lips. She’d never seen Carl cry before. Not even at Shaun’s funeral or anything else that happened during those awful months after. He’d been stoic. Strong. Someone to lean on.

Her own eyes teared up in sympathy. “You’re not losing me. We’ll always be friends. And I’ll still work here. I’ll see your mom and dad. It’ll be okay.”

He brought his head up, his eyes red as he looked at her. Her heart broke a little more. “Please don’t do this,” he said thickly.

“I want to.”

He raked his hands through his hair, squeezing his eyes shut. A tiny tear escaped from them. “I should go.”

“Carl...”

He opened his eyes. “Fuck it.” He reached out for her hand. “You know what, Court? I’m in love with you. I’ve been in love with you since the day Shaun brought you home. And I said nothing, because he’s my brother. I said nothing when you stood beside him at church on your wedding day, and I said nothing all those times I saw you crying whenever you thought nobody was looking. I hate myself for it now. I hate that I didn’t ask you what was wrong. That I didn’t tell you how I feel. If I had, maybe we’d be together right now.”

“It’s not your fault,” she whispered. “And we wouldn’t be together. But we’d still be friends.”

“That’s not enough. I don’t want to be your friend, I want to be your husband. I want to take care of you the way you should be. I want to protect you from douches like Logan Hartson, who’ll break your heart all over again.”

“That can’t happen,” she told him. “I’m not in love with you.” And it hurt to see the pain in his eyes.

“Can’t I love you enough for both of us? I’ll take care of you and the baby. Be a father to them. I’d treat him or her like my own. You know I would.”

She swallowed hard. “I know,” she whispered. “But the baby already has a father. And I’m in love with him.” Pain shot across his face like she’d stabbed him in the gut. “I’m so sorry.”

He stood, curling his fingers around his cap. “I should go.” He wouldn’t even meet her gaze.

She reached for him, but he pulled away. “Carl...”

He shook his head. It was enough for her to know that nothing she could say would make this better. A tear rolled down her cheek as she watched him walk to the door, his shoulders slumped, his head bowed.

She hated this. She hated seeing him hurt. Hated knowing that this family would always be fractured, and some of it was because of her.

Without a word, he pulled the door closed behind him. After less than a minute his engine started up, and the headlights swept across the window.

Her phone started to buzz. She picked it up, seeing Logan’s name on the screen. “Hello?”

“Hey. How are you doing?” His voice felt like a balm to her aching heart.

“I’m good,” she lied, forcing a smile to her lips even though he couldn’t see it. “How are you?”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Logan looked around the restaurant, his critical eye taking in every detail. One of the lamps over table eight was misaligned. He'd get the electrician to fix that today. And table thirty was sloping to the left. Not enough for most people to notice, but it might end up rocking – every restaurant eater's nightmare – and food or drink could slide in the same direction. He'd ask the carpenter to check the legs.

But even with the snags that any new restaurant had, he had to admit it looked amazing. And it should. Six months of hard work had gone into it, after all.

The past few weeks since Christmas had been full on. He'd missed Courtney like crazy. Yeah, they talked every day, and chatted for hours but it wasn't the same. Still, she'd be here tomorrow, along with the rest of his family to celebrate the opening. And in a couple of weeks he'd be flying back to Hartson's Creek for her twenty week ultrasound. It would be their first opportunity to learn the sex of the baby if they wanted to, though they were still on the fence about that.

He wanted all their firsts. That's why this kind of lifestyle wasn't sustainable any more. As much as it gave him pangs to think about leaving all this behind, what choice did he have?

He wanted his family. He didn't want to be the guy who wasn't there when Courtney needed him. He didn't want her to be escorted to the doctor by her best friend or ex-mother-in-law when it was his job to be there. It was crazy how he found himself jealous of an old lady who'd lost her son, just because she would be seeing his child on a screen.

A rap on the front door brought him out of his thoughts. Seeing Cam on the other side of the smoked glass, Logan grinned, walking over to unlatch the lock and let him in.

“This is a surprise,” he said, slapping his brother on the back to let him know it was a welcome one. “What are you doing here?”

“I had an appointment with a doctor across the way. Thought I’d come in and see how you’re doing.” He looked around the restaurant, his eyes wide. “Wow.” He let out a whistle. “This is amazing.”

“Thanks.” Logan inclined his head toward the bar. “You want a drink?”

“I’d love a water. And some juice if you have any. I worked out first thing this morning and haven’t drunk enough since.”

“Sure.” The two of them walked over to the bar. “What was your appointment for?” Logan asked. “Is your ankle acting up again?”

Cam shook his head, leaning on the polished bar as Logan walked around and grabbed two glasses. “Nah, the ankle’s fine. I’ve been having headaches and the team doc wanted me to get some diagnostics done. No biggie.”

Logan looked over his shoulder at his brother. “What kind of headaches?” He passed Cam a tall glass of mineral water, then reached down to the refrigerator for the juice.

“Remember those pressure ones I used to get when we were kids? Like when a storm is coming or something? They feel like those. As though I’ve still got my helmet on when it’s been off for hours.” Cam took a sip of water. “I’m hoping they prescribe the good painkillers and let me get back at it.”

Logan remembered those headaches. He used to get them, especially in the years after their mom died. They’d gone away as he’d got older, and he hadn’t had any since.

“Well let me know what the doc says.” Logan poured them both a tumbler of juice.

“Sure.” Cam smiled at him. “So, are you all ready for tomorrow?”

“As ready as we can be. The decorator arrives early tomorrow to set everything up, and Ryan is already in the kitchen.” He nodded his head toward the heavy metal door. “You’ll also be pleased to hear the booze is here.”

Cam laughed. “I don’t drink. Not during football season. You know this.”

“Yeah, but we can watch Gray and Tanner get drunk. Almost as much fun.” Logan took a sip of his juice. “Even more fun if Maddie and Van start to nag them.”

“Speaking of other halves, I hear Courtney’s coming, too.”

“Yeah she is. Did Grey tell you?”

Cam nodded. “We spoke last night. I’m glad she’s coming. I like her.”

Logan’s gaze met his brother’s. Cam’s approval was important to him. For most of their life, they were the closest people to each other, after all. Logan had told Cam about his plan to leave Boston and head back to Hartson’s Creek to be with Courtney. His stomach had twisted up with guilt at leaving his brother here. But Cam had encouraged him.

“You’re gonna be a dad. Nothing’s more important than that.”

And he was right. Didn’t mean that Logan wasn’t going to miss being in the same city as his brother though.

“Are you bringing someone tomorrow?” Logan asked.

“Probably not.” Cam grinned at him. “I’m not seeing anybody I want my whole family to meet.”

Until a few months ago, Logan had felt the same way. His family and his romantic life were completely separate. Not that he’d had much of a romantic life until Courtney came around. Even so, it took a special kind of woman to cope with meeting all of the Hartsons at once.

“Have you thought about what you’re gonna do back home?” Cam asked him.

“Not yet. I’ll still have a financial interest in the restaurants, but the day-to-day will be done by Paris and the new partner. So there’ll be some work to do from Virginia, but not tons. And my friends, Dan and Ellie who own a restaurant down there have asked for some help with marketing.” He shrugged. None of it sounded particularly exciting. Not compared to opening a glamorous restaurant in the heart of Boston.

“You’ll find something,” Cam said, his voice reassuring. “Though I can imagine it’ll be hard to leave this all behind. It’s been your life for years.”

It had. The restaurant business was who he was. He ate, lived, and breathed it, twenty hours of every day. It was hard to think how he’d deal with all that spare time on his hands.

“Maybe I’ll take up golf,” he said out loud.

Cam laughed. “Yeah, right. You and Dad at the eighteenth hole, the baby in a carrier strapped to your back. I can see it now.”

“Well what are you gonna do when you retire?” Logan asked his brother, turning the tables. “Maybe you can give me some tips.”

“I’m never gonna retire. You’ll have to pull me off the field in a wheelchair.” Cam winked.

It was funny, but not funny all at the same time. Because both of them were defined by what they did. They always had been.

As kids they were *the twins*. Defined by a pure quirk of nature.

As teenagers they were the star football players in the school, which brought its own pleasures and pressures.

And now, Cam was riding high with the Bobcats, and Logan was the owner of the most successful restaurants in



Boston. It was impossible to imagine anything that wouldn't be a come down.

Logan wasn't stupid. He knew there would be a hole in his life. But that hole would be filled. By Courtney and the baby, and the future they had together. That was the certainty that kept pulling him through.

Before he'd met Courtney, he'd laughed at the concept of soul mates. Shaken his head at the way his friends fell one by one for the women who'd changed their lives. He hadn't had space for a relationship like that, even if he'd wanted one.

Yet she'd broken through that shield he'd put over himself. And now he was changing, too.

"We'll be okay," Logan told his brother, as he finished his glass of juice. "We're adaptable. We always have been."

Cam lifted an eyebrow. "Yeah. And if worst comes to worst we can open a Sports Bar together. You run the place, I'll hole up in the corner and tell people about my glory days in exchange for pints of beer."

Logan lifted his empty glass, grinning as his twin clinked his own against it. "It's a deal."

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"OKAY," Lainey said the following day at the salon. "I'm thinking an up do. We'll straighten some of the front, then fix the curls at the nape of your neck. Maybe leave some tumbling down. It'll look perfect with your dress, I promise." She lifted Courtney's hair, her brows locking together as she pulled it this way and that.

Courtney grinned at her friend's reflection in the mirror. "Go for it. I'm in your hands."

"You have the prettiest hair," Maddie said from the salon chair next to Courtney's. Behind her was Nicole, styling her hair into a high top knot that enhanced her high cheekbones and perfectly bow-shaped lips. "Has it always been that curly?"

“Apparently, I had straight blonde hair when I was a baby,” Courtney told her. “But then it all fell out and grew back like this.”

“I wonder if your baby will be blonde at first, too,” Van mused from the other side of Maddie. Along with Becca, Logan’s sister, all four of them were at the salon before they were due to be picked up by a limo and taken to the airport to catch their flight to Boston. It had been Maddie’s idea to come here first, and Lainey had been more than happy to bring two extra stylists in. Courtney looked around at them all, feeling warm inside.

It felt like she was part of something new. Something good. For the first time in a long while she felt excited. Tonight she’d be reunited with Logan, something she was so damn happy about. It had been a long couple of weeks without him, and the telephone and Skype calls didn’t cut it. She needed his warmth, his strength, the deep woodsy scent of his body. No amount of phone calls could substitute for that.

They’d already planned the weekend out. Tonight would be busy, of course, with getting ready for the party and with all the family around. And Sunday morning would be spent having brunch with them all. But in the afternoon, before she was due to catch her flight back, Logan had asked if they could go shopping together. Buy a few novelty items for the baby in Boston, followed by a tour of some of the sights. It felt important to him. As though it was his last chance to show her the city he loved. So of course she readily agreed.

“So, have you and Logan found anywhere to live yet?”

“We haven’t had a chance. Not with the restaurant opening. Hopefully things will calm down now.”

Maddie turned to look at Courtney, earning her disapproval from the stylist. “I bet you’ll miss that place. Presley and Marley loved it when we came over last week. They haven’t stopped babbling about the hens.”

Courtney had shown them around, introducing them to Ellis and Mary, whose faces had lit up at the smiling, toddling little boys. Ellis had even taken them for a ride in his tractor,

much to the twins' delight. It had given her a little insight into how excited they'd be when her own baby arrived. That thought warmed her inside.

"We loved having them there. And they can still come over after I move. I'll still be working on the farm."

"You will?" Lainey's brows lifted. "How are you going to manage that?"

"I'll take the baby with me, at least at first. Mary has offered to help. And then I'll look into daycare."

"How does Logan feel about Mary taking care of the baby?" Lainey wrinkled her nose. "It has to be strange since they're Shaun's parents."

Courtney shrugged. "We haven't had a chance to talk about it yet. But it makes sense. I can go and feed the baby on demand and still work. There aren't many jobs where you can do both."

"It could feel a bit emasculating though," Lainey pointed out. "I'd check it out with him first."

"I will. We've got a lot of things to sort out. But there's plenty of time. I'm only eighteen weeks."

"Enjoy them," Maddie said darkly, though her lips curled up. "You'll never know how good it feels to pee in solitude again."

"Any time you want to pee alone, I'm happy to look after the baby," Becca called out. "And you know I'll look after the twins, too," she added to Maddie. "I love spoiling them. It's the best thing about being an auntie."

"By spoiling them, she means giving them each a huge candy bar, then laughing in Gray's face when she hands them back in the middle of a sugar rush," Maddie told Courtney. "Don't be deceived by her sweet face. She's evil."

"That's why your boys love me," Becca called out over their heads.

"And that's why Tanner and I aren't having kids yet," Van said, deadpan. "Not until Becca gets this auntie thing out of

her system.”

“I’m never getting it out of my system,” Becca said gleefully. “You should just go ahead and get pregnant. Give in to the inevitable.”

“We’re so going to get you back when you meet someone,” Maddie told her. “Gray can’t wait to do the big brother act on the lucky guy.”

Becca was notoriously unlucky in love. She blamed it on the fact that her brothers loomed so large in Hartson’s Creek. It would take a strong man to deal with them.

“Tanner’s already made an album up of your baby photos,” Van added, laughing at Becca’s outraged expression. “I’m not lying. He claims he’ll get it out the first time you bring a guy home.”

“I’m not scared of Gray and Tanner,” Becca said, laughing. “I know all their darkest secrets. And I’m more than happy to spill them for a fee.” She rubbed her hands together.

“I might take you up on that,” Van said, pretending to twirl a moustache. “Tanner played a prank on me yesterday, and I owe him one.”

“What kind of prank?” Becca asked. “Tell me more.”

Courtney smiled as Van related Tanner’s antics of the day before, when he’d jumped out of the closet, wearing a Freddy Krueger mask. Van had apparently screamed and hit him before he could run away from her. When she described chasing him around the house and yard with the first thing she could lay her hands on – a wooden spoon – the women all collapsed into laughter.

It was hard to remember the last time Courtney had spent time with girl friends like this. Of course she had Lainey – and she loved her to bits – but these women were wonderful. It was nice being able to talk about the Hartson men – or the Heartbreak Brothers, as Van insisted on calling them, much to Becca’s amusement. It was fun to listen about Van and Tanner’s teasing relationship, and Maddie and Gray’s love of being parents.

When her phone buzzed in her purse down by her feet, her first inclination was to leave it and check later. But then it buzzed again, and she realized it was ringing. “Ugh,” she said, meeting Lainey’s eyes with a grimace. “Will you hate me if I answer?”

“Don’t move. I’ll get it.” Lainey held the lock of hair up in her right hand, angling her left side downward to pick up the purse. Courtney bit down a smile at her friend’s awkward movement.

“Thank you,” she said, as Lainey dropped the purse in her lap then wrapped the lock of hair around her fingers before pinning it. Courtney rifled through her bag and lifted the phone out, blinking as she saw the name on the screen.

*Ellis Roberts.* He was calling from his cellphone, something he so rarely used it gave her a jolt to see the number.

She accepted the call, wincing as Lainey pulled her hair too tight. “Sorry,” Lainey whispered.

“Hello?” Courtney said, as the call connected. “Ellis? Is everything okay?”

There was a sob that cut right through her. It was high and soft enough for her to know it was Mary, not her husband.

“Courtney,” she gasped. “Can you meet us at the hospital? It’s Carl. He’s been shot.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Courtney rushed to the hospital on pure adrenaline, her heart hammering against her chest as she parked in the lot. It wasn't until she got out of the car that she began to feel light headed.

It felt like déjà vu. Memories from years ago assailed her. A different brother, the same hospital, the same fear. The same horrible, horrible guilt that the last time she'd seen him, he'd looked broken. Because of her.

This was all because of her.

She hardly managed to keep it together long enough to give Carl's name at the desk.

"Are you a relative?" the officious-looking woman behind it asked.

"His sister-in-law." It was *almost* a truth.

The woman nodded and looked him up on the computer in front of her, then gave Courtney directions to the ER waiting room. It was crazy that she even needed to be told how to get there. The way should have been etched in her memory from the last time. But her mind felt fuzzy, as though the connections weren't firing the way they should. She couldn't think, couldn't do anything except try to remember to breathe.

Carl had been shot.

That's all Courtney had heard before Mary had hung up. But then, she didn't need to hear any more. The tone in Mary's

voice was enough to send a shot of ice cold fear through her veins.

Mary and Ellis were losing another son. This time, Courtney didn't know if they'd survive it.

They were in the far corner of the waiting room, both staring into the air in front of them, their hands tightly clasped together as though afraid to let go. Courtney hurried over, blinking away the tears as she hugged them both.

"Is there any news?" she asked. "How is he?"

"We're still waiting for the doctor to come out." Mary's voice was a whisper.

"Do you know what happened?" she asked them, trying to swallow down her panic.

"There was a robbery at a gas station," Ellis said, his voice bleak. "That's all we know."

Courtney looked away so they couldn't see the tears in her eyes. She couldn't crumple in front of them. They didn't need to be worrying about her when she should be the one doing the consoling. Her leg muscles felt weak. Enough for her to sit down heavily next to Mary.

From the corner of her eye she could see the old woman's lips moving rapidly. It took Courtney a moment to realize she was saying a prayer. Begging for her son to stay alive. The only child that she had left.

Touching her bump, Courtney closed her eyes and sent up a prayer, too. Mary and Ellis didn't deserve this. Not again.

Her phone buzzed, and she opened her eyes to look at the caller. *Maddie Hartson*. Shooting a rueful glance at Mary, she lifted it up. "I should take this. They're worried about Carl."

"People are so kind," Mary said softly. "Yes, you should answer it."

"Hello?" Courtney's voice was quiet as she walked to the far window in an attempt not to disturb anybody in the waiting room. Every single person sitting here had their own sad story. They didn't need to hear hers.

“Courtney? How’s Carl? Is there any news?” Maddie asked, her voice full of concern.

“Nothing yet,” Courtney murmured. “We’re waiting to hear from the doctor.”

“Oh no. We’re praying so hard for you all.” Maddie sighed. “Are you sure I can’t come be with you? We’re on the way to the airport, but I could ask the driver to turn around.”

Courtney’s heart clenched. “No. It’s fine, but thank you for the offer. You have a flight to catch.” The thought of it made her stomach flip. She was supposed to be catching that airplane to Boston, too.

What if this had happened a few hours later, while she was in mid-air? The thought of Mary and Ellis coping alone made her breath catch in her throat. She would have let them down.

*Again.*

“I could ask Gray to delay the flight,” Maddie suggested. “Or I could catch a later one?”

“No,” Courtney said quickly. “Please go. Logan’s expecting you all. I don’t want him to be let down.”

“Okay,” Maddie replied softly. “But please let me know of any changes. You take it easy, okay? Look after yourself and that baby.”

“I will. Thank you.” She tried to keep her voice even, saying goodbye before she ended the call. With her lips pursed, she switched her phone off altogether, not sure she had the strength to speak to anybody else right now.

Not even Logan. Or maybe especially not him. She swallowed hard, but it did nothing to calm her stomach.

When she walked back to where Mary and Ellis were sitting, nausea washed over her again.

“I need the bathroom,” she whispered to them, not wanting to cause any alarm. “I’ll only be a moment.”

She made it to the stall just in time, though it was a close call. Leaning over the bowl, she threw up her breakfast, her



body shaking until there was nothing left to come out. Tears ran hot down her face as she flushed it away, then walked over to the sink to clean herself up as best she could.

When she looked at herself in the mirror, she grimaced. Her hair was half-styled, with pins keeping her ringlets curled around the nape of her neck. Courtney pulled them out, throwing them in the trash as her hair spilled out over her shoulders.

She hated the reflection staring back at her. It belonged to a woman who ruined everything she touched. Two years ago, she'd told a man she wasn't sure she loved him any more, and he'd ended up here, losing his life less than an hour later.

And today it felt as though it was happening all over again.

This time she wasn't sure she could take it.

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“MRS. ROBERTS?”

Courtney looked up from the seat where she was next to Mary. It took her a moment to realize the doctor wasn't talking to her. He was looking at Mary and Ellis with tired eyes.

“I'm she,” Mary said, trying to stand. Courtney reached for her arm, helping her up, as Ellis supported her on the other side. “Is my son all right? Where is he?”

Courtney swallowed hard. There was a clock on the wall in front of them, the second hand slowly ticking. They'd been here for less than an hour. If the doctor was coming out already, that had to be bad news, didn't it? Otherwise he'd be in surgery with Carl.

“He's still in the ER, ma'am, but I'm pleased to say he's doing well. The bullet went clean through his arm. It didn't hit any bones or tendons. He's being cleaned and stitched up, then we'll want to monitor him until tomorrow.” He gave her a small smile. “You'll be able to see him once he's admitted to the floor. Hopefully within the hour.”

Mary blinked, as though she didn't quite understand. "He's all right?" she whispered, her hand fluttering at her chest.

"He lost some blood, which we've replaced. And he's shocked, of course. But yes, he's doing pretty well considering."

"I thought... I thought..." Mary let out a sob. Her legs gave way, and Courtney just managed to catch her before she slumped to the ground. She blinked away her own tears, sending up a silent prayer of thanks.

"He's okay," Courtney said, exhaling raggedly. "Carl's okay."

Mary nodded, her face contorted with emotion. Ellis patted her arm, his own expression stoic. He never was a man to show emotions.

"I'll have a nurse come for you once he's ready for visitors," the doctor told them. "But as I said, it might take a while. Feel free to go to the cafeteria in the meantime if you need a break."

But none of them were in the mood for food or drink. Instead, they sat and waited, all three of them silent until Mary suddenly turned to look at her.

"Aren't you supposed to be flying to Boston?" she asked, her voice steadier than it had been.

"I was." Courtney shrugged. "But I'm not going anymore. It's fine."

"Oh sweetheart. But you were so looking forward to it." She looked up at the clock. "What time are you supposed to catch the flight?"

"It should have taken off ten minutes ago."

"Oh no." Mary's voice rose. "Can you catch a later flight? You shouldn't miss this."

Courtney shook her head. "I'm staying right here with you. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else." Her heart ached at the thought of not going. But what could she do? Even if Carl was

okay, Mary and Ellis would want to be with him. And somebody had to take care of the farm.

No, she wasn't going to Boston. Not when she had responsibilities here. And in a little while, when she found the guts, she'd let Logan know what had happened.

But right now, the thought of hearing his voice made her eyes water. Because he'd be another person she'd be letting down today.

And she hated being the cause of anybody's pain.

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LOGAN GRIMACED as his call went straight to voicemail again, leaning his head back against the restaurant wall. "Court, it's Logan. *Again*. I hope you're doing okay. Call me back when you get a chance, all right? Just let me know you're hanging in there. Okay, bye." He ended the call and sighed. This was the fifth time he'd called. He'd even tried calling the hospital, but they'd refused to give out any information.

He glanced at his watch. Gray and the others would be arriving any minute now. It had been Maddie who'd called him before they took off and told him about Carl's shooting. It had taken Gray's soft, reassuring tones to stop Logan from catching the first flight out to be with Courtney.

"Just wait," Gray had said over the phone. "I know you want to be with her, and it's right that you should. But at least wait to hear how bad it is. You've got a damn restaurant opening tonight. Get busy sorting everything out in case you need to leave, okay?"

Gray was right, but it didn't stop Logan from feeling absolutely fucking useless. Especially when Courtney wasn't answering her phone. He couldn't even ask one of his family to go and check on her, as they were all on their way to Boston.

He gritted his teeth, walking through the backdoor and into the kitchen. It was full of staff leaning over steaming pans and

calling out directions to each other. He could see Ryan muttering to his sous-chef, something about the carrots being cut too thick. Logan nodded to him in greeting, then walked back into the main restaurant, where Paris and their event organizer were supervising the décor.

“Everything okay?” Paris asked, her face bright.

“Fine.” Logan gave her a curt nod. He hadn’t told her about Courtney. He didn’t really want to talk about it. Just wanted to find out what the hell was going on.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. He lifted it out, exhaling audibly when he saw Courtney’s name on the screen. Without saying a word to Paris, he accepted the call, turning on his foot and retracing his steps through the kitchen and back out to the alley.

“Hey,” he said softly. “You okay? I’ve been trying to call you.”

“I know.” She sounded far away, her voice a gentle echo down the line. “Sorry. I was caught up at the hospital.”

“How’s Carl?” He almost didn’t want to ask. Maddie’s phone call had made it sound bad.

“He’s okay,” she told him. “It was a flesh wound. The bullet got him in the arm, but went clean out the other side. I guess they’re looking for it at the gas station right now.” She breathed out. “He’s going to need to rest his arm for a while, and they’re keeping him over night, but no permanent damage.

Logan’s body sagged with relief. “That’s amazing news. God, I thought it was bad when Maddie told me.”

“I did, too.” Her voice was rough. “I thought the worst.”

He ran his tongue across his lip, thinking out their next move. “Does that mean you still might be able to make it to the opening?” he asked. “I could check the flights for you. What are you, about thirty minutes away from the airport? You’d probably arrive a bit late for the first course, but you wouldn’t miss too much. And tomorrow I can make sure you are able to rest.”

“Logan...” She sighed. “I don’t think I can make it.”

He swallowed. “I’d really like it if you could. I want to make sure you’re okay. Pamper you a bit. You’ve had a hard time. You could do with some relaxing.”

“I should stay with Mary and Ellis. They need me.”

Her words stopped him short. His chest tightened. “I need you,” he told her, his voice low. “I want you here with me.”

“I know.” She breathed unevenly. “I know you do. I know you need me. Everybody needs me. But I can’t be there for you. Not now. I have to take care of Mary and Ellis. It’s my fault Carl’s injured. The same way it’s my fault that Shaun died.”

Logan frowned. “What do you mean?”

“He asked me to marry him. I said no.”

Logan blinked. It felt like he’d been kicked in the gut. “Carl asked you?” His voice was loud. It was so damn wrong, but he felt himself getting jealous. Angry, even. “When did that happen?”

“A few days ago.” Her voice was small.

Logan frowned. “Why didn’t you tell me? Did he get upset with you? Did something else happen?” He could feel his muscles tighten at the thought. “Damn it, Courtney. That man is bad news.”

“That man is in a hospital bed. And I’m not the only one hiding things. He told me he stopped you for speeding.”

His gut clenched. “It was nothing. It didn’t matter.”

“But you should have told me.”

“I know.” He already regretted saying anything. “I just... I don’t like him. And I know you’re worried about him, but I’d prefer if you stayed away from him. He’s only going to cause trouble.”

One of the kitchen staff walked out, carrying a large trash can to empty into the dumpster. His eyebrows lifted as he saw

Logan. He hurried over to empty it, then scurried back into the kitchen.

“I can’t stay away from him completely. He’s my brother-in-law. And Mary and Ellis’s son. I don’t go out of my way to see him, but it’ll be impossible to avoid him all of the time.”

“He’s not your brother-in-law. Not any more,” Logan pointed out. “And I just want you safe. You and the baby.” It was killing him to be so far away. He felt helpless.

“Carl isn’t going to hurt me. He’s family. And so are Mary and Ellis.”

Logan sighed. “I get that, I do. But they’re the past, Courtney. Us and the baby, we’re the future. That’s why I’m giving up the restaurant business to be with you. It’s my job to take care of you both, to make sure you’re okay. Just help me with this until I can be there, okay?”

“Are you asking me to stop seeing them?” she whispered softly. “Is that really what you’re saying?”

His chest felt tight. “No,” he protested. “I’m just asking you to think carefully. I know they’re important to you, but they’re not really family, are they? You married into them.”

“Logan, family can be more than blood relations.” Her voice sounded small.

“I get that. I have a lot of close friends here in Boston that I’m giving up, Court. For you. For us. Why can’t you do the same?”

“I knew this would happen. I knew it.” She let out a ragged breath.

“You knew what?” He frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“I knew you’d regret giving up the restaurant business and leaving Boston.”

Logan blinked. “I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t need to. It feels like because you’re giving things up, you expect me to do the same with the Roberts.

Like a tit for tat or something.” Her voice wobbled. “Do you expect me to give up working on the farm, too?”

He gave a nervous laugh. “I was assuming you would. It’ll be impossible to combine that and the baby.”

She was silent for a moment. He could hear the rumble of conversation from the kitchen, alongside the low hum of traffic from the highway. Logan leaned back, raking his hands through his hair. “Court, are you still there?”

“Yeah.” She breathed out. “I was just thinking.”

His stomach tightened. “What about?”

“Maybe you should take a few days to think about this. About selling your interest in the restaurant, and whether you’re really ready to do that. Because it’s a lot to give up, Logan, especially when I can’t agree to give up the people that I love. It’s unequal, and I’m scared you’re going to resent me for it.”

Panic rose up inside him. “You want to break things off?” he asked her. “I can’t believe this.”

“That’s not what I said. I just want you to think about it. Go and enjoy your opening gala, and really think if you want to give this all up. Because I’d hate for you to do it and regret it one day. You can still be a dad if you stay in Boston. We can still have joint custody. You don’t have to give everything up because you think that’s the only way to parent. There are choices.”

“I choose you. I told you that.” His voice was low.

“But will you still choose me if I refuse to give up my family? My livelihood?” He could hear her swallow. “Things are crazy right now. You should take some time to think it all through. We both should.”

“I don’t understand. What does that mean?”

She paused, and he could feel his head begin to pound. All the things he thought he was certain about felt like they were slipping out of his hand. The panic that had started to curl around his guts radiated out, making him jittery. Afraid.

He was losing control.

“Look, we have the ultrasound next Thursday. Maybe we shouldn’t talk until then. It will give you a chance to think things through and decide what it is you really want. And if it means you stay in Boston, then we can work through that.”

“But I...”

“I *know*,” she said softly. “I know it feels painful. And it doesn’t mean I don’t care about you, because I do. But I can’t go through a broken relationship again. I can’t be the one who lets you down because I don’t do exactly what you expect of me. Not when there’s the baby to think about.” She sighed. “This feels really unequal, because you’re giving up so much more than me. I don’t want you to resent me in the future because of it. I’ve had enough resentment and hate in my life.”

He was losing her. He knew it. And he had no idea how to stop it from happening.

“So we can’t talk until Thursday?” he asked, frowning.

“I just think it’ll help. This thing between us, it’s like a drug. A really, really good drug. But like anything addictive, it can make your brain go a little crazy. I think if we took some time apart, you’ll be able to work out what you really feel.”

“I know how I feel about you, Courtney.”

“And you’ve told me how you feel about the Roberts. One way or another they’ll always be in my life. They’re my family, and you need to think about that.”

A shot of jealousy worked through him. He hated the idea of not talking to her. She sounded so damn far away right now. All he wanted to do was hold her, to breathe her in. That would make everything right.

“And once I think about it? What then?”

“I guess we’ll talk about it next week. This is killing me as much as it’s killing you, Logan. I wish I could do everything you’re asking of me. I get it, I do. But for the past eight years, Mary and Ellis have been everything to me. They’ve always been there for me. I can’t abandon them now.”



*Shit.* It hurt to hear her say it, but he understood. And it felt like something huge between them. A mountain he had no idea how to climb.

“I can’t stand the idea of not talking to you.”

“I know. But it’s just for a few days. And we have to be the adults here, Logan. We have the baby to think about.” She exhaled heavily. “I’m so tired. I wish I could sleep for a thousand years right now.”

“Are you still at the hospital?” he asked her.

“Yeah. I’m just outside the entrance.”

“You should go home. You and the baby need to rest.” And he needed to stop being a damn needy baby himself. Courtney and their child were the only things that mattered. He said it himself, he needed them to be safe. “And you’re right,” he said, his throat tight as hell. “I promise to think really hard. But you should know that I care about you. Like nothing I’ve ever cared about before.”

She gave a little sob and it almost killed him.

“Go home,” he urged. “Just take care of yourself okay? Promise me that at least.”

“Okay,” she agreed, her voice a sigh.

He squeezed his eyes shut. His head was pounding.

“Good luck with the opening,” she told him.

He almost wanted to laugh. In the past few minutes he’d forgotten about the restaurant opening. It felt so unimportant compared to this.

“Thanks.”

“Goodbye, Logan.”

It sounded final. Like a shot to the heart.

“I’ll see you on Thursday,” he told her. More of a promise to himself than to her.

And until then, he’d somehow make it through.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



The cottage felt oppressive as Courtney walked inside. After talking to Logan, she'd made her way back up to Carl's private room to sit with Mary and Ellis as he told them what had happened. A robbery gone wrong, perpetrated by a seventeen year old boy with a gun he'd stolen from a friend. The gas station owner had pushed the panic button and Carl was the cop who'd happened to be the closest. As soon as he walked into the station the kid had panicked, turning around to look at Carl, his finger too hard on the trigger.

The kid was lucky Carl had only gotten a flesh wound. A few inches to the right, and it could have been fatal.

She'd left once he was asleep, her body aching after a long, emotional day. Her heart was aching, too. She was still processing her conversation with Logan.

It had almost killed her to suggest they take a break for the next few days.

She felt weak and exhausted, but more than anything she felt desperately sad. Today was supposed to be a good day. She'd been so excited about seeing him, about flying to Boston with his family.

Being part of one of the biggest days of his life.

Now she felt empty.

She put her phone on the kitchen counter. There were two messages there. One from Lainey and the other from Maddie, both asking how Carl was doing. But nothing from Logan.

He hadn't called or messaged. It was stupid, because she'd asked him for some space and he was honoring that. But it still hurt to be without him. She was so used to speaking with him every evening, hearing his low, warm voice as she laid in bed, her phone pressed to her ear.

For the first time in what felt like a lifetime, everything had made sense. She had a future to look forward to with Logan and their baby, and it had filled her up inside.

And now? All the fears and uncertainty she'd ignored over the past few weeks had risen up. She was in love with him, she knew that, but she also knew she couldn't let him make this sacrifice for her if he wasn't ready. It would break her heart and his.

She let out a deep sigh, leaning on the counter and pressing her hands against her swollen stomach. This baby inside of her needed two parents who didn't mess things up. He or she deserved consistency, love. She knew what resentment did to a relationship. She'd watched her marriage with Shawn become a cage to both of them. Learned that hope and love weren't enough. You had to talk, to be open, but more than anything to know your limits. She wouldn't have another relationship like she'd had with Shaun. She couldn't.

She ached for Logan. That was the truth of it. It had only been a few hours, yet there was already this hole inside her. One that he'd left behind.

A single tear ran down her cheek. She tried to breathe in, but it turned into a sob. It was as though the dam she'd built up had finally been breached as more tears pooled in her eyes, running hotly down her face, as she wailed out all the angst that was inside her.

Maybe that's why she almost missed it. A tiny push that felt like a bubble popping inside her. She swallowed her cry as she felt it again, low down in her belly.

"Is that you?" she whispered. She got another push in response, almost as if the baby could understand her.

He or she was kicking! Courtney swallowed down the tears, a smile slowly pulling at her lips. It was crazy how real it made everything. Just one little touch and she was a goner. Completely at the mercy of this tiny dictator growing inside of her.

Joy washed over the misery, mixing together until she was laughing and crying at the same time. And of course she reached for her phone, wanting to call Logan, to tell him everything. Because she knew he'd want to know that his kid was kicking her.

But she couldn't. Not until Thursday. She'd asked him to take the time to think, and he'd agreed. It would be completely unfair of her to message him now and mix things up all over again. This little kicker inside of her deserved better.

Instead, she tapped out a quick message to the only other person she needed right now.

*I know it's late, but I need you. Can you come over?*

Within a minute, Lainey's reply appeared on the screen.

*Of course. I'm on my way. x*

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"I BROUGHT CHOCOLATE," Lainey said when Courtney opened the front door of the cottage. "And donuts. Just in case the chocolate doesn't work." She gave Courtney a gentle smile, then wrapped her in a hug. "Oh honey, I'm so sorry. How's Carl doing?"

"Pretty good." Courtney swallowed hard to stop herself from crying again. She felt so wrung out she wasn't sure she could take it. "They're planning on releasing him in the morning. Mary wants him to stay with them so she can take care of him, but he's having none of it. Keeps talking about going back to work on Monday."

"You're a strong bunch, you Roberts." Lainey stroked Courtney's curls. "Shall I make us a warm drink?"

Courtney shook her head. “I’ll just mainline the chocolate. I don’t want to dilute it.”

“That’s my girl.” Lainey nodded approvingly. Then she frowned. “Hey, have you been crying?”

“A bit,” Courtney admitted.

“I guess it was a shock, Carl getting shot.”

“It was,” Courtney agreed. “But I wasn’t crying about Carl. Not really.” She sat down on the sofa, Lainey taking the seat next to her. “Logan and I had a discussion. A tough one. And we agreed to take some space from each other.”

Lainey took the chocolate bar and snapped off two chunks, passing one to Courtney and pressing the other into her own mouth. “Was it because of Carl?”

Courtney tipped her head to the side. “Kind of? I mean it was and it wasn’t. It was more about us. About our expectations of each other. I’m so afraid he’s making the wrong decision in leaving his career and moving back here.”

“Tell me exactly what happened.” Lainey kept the chocolate supply going, breaking off another two chunks for them both. “How did you end up deciding to take some space?”

Courtney swallowed her mouthful of chocolate and told Lainey all about her phone call with Logan.

“Oh boy.” Lainey squeezed her hand. “You guys know how to push each other’s buttons. On the plus side, the make up sex will be amazing.”

For the first time in hours, Courtney laughed, even though it felt hollow. “I don’t think we’ll be doing any of that for a while.” She licked her lips, the faint taste of chocolate clinging to them. “So what do you think? Did I overreact?”

“From the sounds of it you both did. I mean, I get him feeling weird about your in-laws, anybody would. But he shouldn’t have talked to you about it at that moment. That’s a conversation to have face to face.”

Courtney sighed. “Do you think he was right? Asking me to stop seeing the Roberts?”

“Hell no. He’s an idiot for even suggesting that. And I bet he knows it, too. But the thing is, any guy would feel a little weird about his girlfriend spending so much time with her ex-in-laws.”

Courtney went to interject, but Lainey lifted her hand. “I said he’d feel weird. I didn’t say that gave him the right to ask you not to see them.” She grabbed the donut box, opening it up. “Look, I’m no expert on relationships, but it feels to me like you two had to skip a few relationship stages thanks to you getting pregnant. You’re both so different, there are bound to be struggles. And normally, those get ironed out as you get closer. You talk things through, have a few discussions, throw a few plates.” She grinned. “And then you have the hot make-up sex.”

“You seem obsessed by the make-up sex.” Courtney shook her head.

“Believe me, it’s the best kind.” Lainey winked. “Anyway, what I’m trying to say is that both of you are gonna have to learn to give a little. Not just over this, but over everything. That’s what relationships are. About finding common ground. And sometimes, you’re going to argue about it a lot at first.”

Courtney nodded, taking in all her words. “But how do we do that when we seem so far apart? It feels like everything is so black and white between us.”

“Can’t you find any shades of grey at all?” Lainey asked.

Reaching for a donut, Courtney took a deep breath. “I guess I could have introduced him to Ellis and Mary. He hasn’t met them.”

Lainey smiled. “That would make him feel more included for sure. And maybe you should have talked to him before agreeing that Mary could watch the baby.”

“I said I’d talk to him,” Courtney protested. “I just haven’t yet.”

“It feels to me like you both have a lot of talking to do,” Lainey said gently.

There was a lump in Courtney’s throat as she looked up at her friend. “I’m scared,” she admitted, her voice thin.

Lainey took her hand. “Oh honey, what of?”

“I keep hurting every body I love. And I don’t know how to stop it.”

“You don’t hurt anybody,” Lainey said, her voice sure. “You make everybody’s world a better place. Mine, Mary’s, Ellis’s, even Logan’s. Hell, especially Logan’s.” She stared into Courtney’s eyes, her brow dipping. “Is this about Shaun?”

“What about him?” Courtney swallowed, but the lump in her throat grew bigger.

“You know that you weren’t responsible for him dying, right? It wasn’t your fault. He made his own decisions, chose his own path. And whatever caused his death that night – whether it was an accident or intentional – that was Shaun’s choice. Not yours.”

Courtney inhaled raggedly. “I broke him,” she whispered.

“No you didn’t. He was already broken. That’s why he treated you badly. Why he ended up driving while drunk. And none of that has anything to do with you.” Her eyes flashed as she leaned forward. “As for Logan, he’s not broken. Not from what you’ve told me. Hell, he may be a little messed up, but aren’t we all? He’s not going to hurt you, Courtney. Not the way Shaun did.”

Courtney’s chest felt as though somebody was pressing down on it, pushing all the air out of her. Realization passed over her; she was afraid. So afraid of getting hurt the way Shaun had hurt her. And so scared of hurting the people she loved. But now it meant she’d pushed Logan away at the time he needed her most.

And she needed him in exactly the same way.

“You okay?” Lainey asked when Courtney had been silent for a while.

“Just thinking,” Courtney said softly.

“About Logan?”

Courtney’s lip lifted up. “Kind of. About me, really, and all the things that have happened to me. And here I am, moving forward.”

“Yes you are. Because you’re an amazingly strong woman. And you’re gonna make the most fantastic mom.”

“Oh! I forgot to tell you. I felt the baby kick.”

Lainey’s mouth dropped open, an indignant expression molding her features. “You did? When? Why didn’t you tell me? Dammit Courtney, you need to talk more.”

“Tonight, when I got home. I was crying about Logan and everything else and then I felt this little tap inside me. I thought it was my imagination at first, but then the baby did it again. That’s when I messaged you.”

Lainey looked almost mollified. “Okay, I’ll let you off. Do you think I could feel it?”

“It’s too soon.” Courtney wrinkled her nose with sympathy. “And anyway, don’t you think Logan should feel it first? He’s the dad.”

“And there’s your shade of grey,” Lainey said, her voice approving. “Even though I hate this particular one.” She stuffed part of her donut in her mouth, waiting to continue until she’d swallowed it down. “You’re going to be okay, you know? More than okay.”

“I hope so,” Courtney said. And maybe that little hole inside was filling up a little. With the baby’s kicks and Lainey’s words.

The rest of the void? Well, she’d have to work out how to fill that herself.

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LOGAN'S CHEEKS were aching from smiling and talking and pretending that everything was okay. That he hadn't fucked up the one good thing in his life.

It was almost eleven. He knew that from checking his phone, the way he had every fifteen minutes in the vain hope that she'd messaged or called or done something to tell him it was going to be okay.

But there was nothing. He shouldn't be surprised. She was the one who'd suggested they needed space from each other. Why would she contact him? But it still felt like a blunt knife to his chest, slowly twisting and turning and making everything inside him ache. He was a fixer. He didn't let things get him down. He saw what the problem was and handled it immediately – that's how he'd become so successful in the restaurant industry. And that was why half of him wanted to be on a plane right now, flying to see her, to sort this out, instead of thinking things through.

“The food was beautiful,” Maddie said, walking up behind him where he was standing at the bar. Everybody was still seated, the room filled with laughter and chatter that meant nothing to him. He couldn't even bring himself to be pleased that the opening night was going so well.

“Thanks.” He flashed her a smile. And yeah, his cheeks still ached.

“Are you okay?” she asked, her brows furrowed together. “Any news from Courtney?” He'd given his family the low down when they arrived at the restaurant earlier. There had been sighs of relief that Carl was okay. But he hadn't been able to tell them the truth about his conversation with Courtney. Or that it felt as though everything was messed up.

He could hardly understand it himself. How could he explain it to them?

“I'm guessing she's gone to bed,” he said, his jaw tight. “It's been a long day for her.”

Maddie nodded. “You're right. She must be exhausted. I'll call her tomorrow.” She smiled brightly at him. “It's a shame

she couldn't be here.”

“Yeah.” His voice was rough. “And if you call her, can you tell her I'm thinking of her?”

There was a pause as Maddie took in his words. “Is there something wrong between the two of you?” she asked. “Why wouldn't you tell her yourself?”

Logan swallowed hard. “It's nothing. We just had a few words, that's all.”

“About what?”

“Logan, I need you,” Paris said, flashing Maddie a smile. “Sorry, we need to do a quick interview with the trade press. I hope you don't mind me stealing him?”

“Not at all,” Maddie said, her eyes still wary as they scanned Logan's face. “I was headed to the bathroom anyway. I'll catch you later, Logan.”

He felt a wave of relief wash over him. At least he didn't need to explain himself to her right now. But he knew it was a brief reprieve. She would mention it to Gray, who'd talk to Tanner and Cam, and even Becca. All of them would be dissecting his love life before he'd finished the interview.

They'd know what a mess he'd made of everything.

His chest tightened at the thought. He'd just about held it together for the past few hours, mostly from ignoring the fact that he'd messed up. But if they made him talk, he would probably sob like a baby.

That was why he planned on avoiding his family for as long as possible.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



It took an hour, but eventually Cam managed to corner Logan while he was outside in the alley, trying to get some air.

“What happened?” Cam asked, walking over to where Logan was leaning against the wall, letting the cold Boston air freeze his skin. “Maddie said you and Courtney are having problems? I thought everything was okay.”

Logan lifted his head up. “Courtney wants us to have some space. She’s asked me not to call her.” He leaned against the wall he’d just hit. Luckily, it held no grudges. “This was supposed to be the biggest night of my life, man, and I messed everything up.”

Cam frowned. “Why does she want space? I don’t get it.”

Logan rubbed his brow with the heel of his hand. “I asked her to come out here now that she knows Carl’s okay and she refused. Said she needs to be with *her* family.” He breathed out raggedly. “But I thought I was supposed to be her family. Me and the baby.”

“You asked her to choose?” Cam asked, lifting an eyebrow.

Logan nodded. “I guess I assumed. And she took that as me expecting her to make the same kind of sacrifices I am. She thinks I’m going to regret leaving all this behind.” He gestured at the restaurant in front of them.

Cam turned, leaning against the wall next to Logan, turning his head so their faces were only inches apart. “You

always did expect too much from people.” He lifted an eyebrow. “And you’re a really sore loser.”

“Says the guy who plays in the NFL.”

“Yeah, I play,” Cam agreed. “Doesn’t mean I always expect to win.”

Logan frowned. “That’s a can of shit. You *always* want to win.”

“I didn’t say I don’t *want* to win. I said I don’t always *expect* to win. There’s a difference.” Cam’s voice was low, shrouded by the night. “When I lose, I pick myself up and play again. When you lose, you take yourself out of the game.”

“What do you mean?” Logan asked him.

“Look at your knee injury. How many times have you played football since you came out of the hospital?”

Logan shook his head. “Never. You know that. They said I could never play again.”

“They said you could never play *professionally*. Nothing about not playing for fun, or playing in a local league. But you decided that if you couldn’t be the best, you wouldn’t play at all. Same with relationships. Remember the counseling you had? Trying to work through why you always messed things up?”

“Yeah, I remember.” Though right now he was regretting telling his brother about it.

“You never put any effort in when it came to those. Because you couldn’t control the outcome. It’s as if you can’t feel like a failure if you don’t play. And that’s why this hurts. Because for once in your life you actually took a leap in the dark. Threw yourself into something you had no control over. And now you feel like you’ve failed.”

“You’re making me sound like a coward.” Logan leaned his head back against the cold brick.

“You’re not a coward. Look at everything you’ve achieved. You’re just,” Cam scrunched his nose up, “I don’t know. You like to control things. The outcomes. And that’s

been massively successful in your professional life. I don't know anybody who could achieve what you have. But in your private life?" Cam shrugged. "It leads you here. Trying to control other people because you're scared shitless that they might let you down."

Logan opened his mouth to protest again, but the words got stuck in his throat. There was an honesty to Cam's words that hurt. He was right about Logan never wanting to play football again. He hadn't seen the point if he couldn't be the best. And the best was what he'd become in the restaurant world. He'd made damn sure of that.

But with Courtney? He had no control. And it scared him.

"You gotta learn to let go of the outcome," Cam said softly. "Which I know sounds crazy coming from someone like me. But if you keep trying to control people they're gonna let you down, because nobody wants to be your puppet."

"Is that what you think I was doing? Trying to control Courtney?" Logan asked, his chest tighter than ever. Had asking her to choose been controlling?

"Yeah, I do. I don't think you needed to ask her to come here tonight. You told us earlier that she had a hell of a day. She needs to relax, take care of herself and the baby, not travel here to see you being the big man on campus."

Logan swallowed hard, thinking about the baby. Damn, he hoped Courtney was resting right now. "I feel like I'm competing with a dead man," he whispered, to himself as much as his twin.

"Dead people can't compete. They're dead." Cam shook his head. "You can't make everything in life a competition. You gotta trust in your gut. Trust in the people you love to treat you right. Don't keep pushing them, because you'll always be disappointed. Courtney and the baby are the best things that have ever happened to you. Everybody says so. Gray, Maddie, Tanner, and especially Becca." He chuckled. "You've smiled more in the past few months than you have in years. And when the two of you are together, you just work. She calms you. Makes you a better man. And I'm telling you

now, that if I ever find someone who makes me smile like that I'm gonna cling onto them and never let go." He nudged Logan's shoulder with his own. "Hell, maybe I should talk to Courtney. See if she likes NFL players."

"Fuck you. Leave her alone," Logan growled.

This time, Cam laughed loudly. "You need to pull your head out of your ass before you lose her. She's everything and she loves you."

Logan blinked. "You think she still loves me after this?"

"Why don't you ask her that?"

"Because she wants space, remember?"

Cam slowly nodded his head. "Yeah, I remember. And it's right that you give her some time if she's asked for it. But eventually one of you will have to make the first move." The corner of his lips quirked up. "And as controlling as it sounds, I think it should be you."

"You think she'll want me to?" Logan felt hope surge through his body.

"I don't know," Cam admitted. "And neither do you. And I understand that scares the shit out of you. But what I do know is that the two of you are having a baby, one that deserves to have two parents who are at least civil to each other. Hopefully more." He nudged his brother once again. "And if you aren't, then this uncle's gonna bash your head in."

"I'd like to see you try."

The kitchen door opened, light spilling onto the dark concrete. Tanner and Gray walked out. "Everything okay?" Gray asked, as the two of them made their way outside.

Logan's eyes met Cam's. "Yeah," he said, pulling his gaze back to his older brother. It wasn't exactly a lie. "I just needed a breath of air."

"Well if you two are done having your twin moment, you should come back in," Tanner said, grinning at them both. "Becca's drunk, Maddie's half-asleep, and Van is talking about us all going clubbing. So I suggest we have one last drink and

head back to our hotel.” He clapped Logan’s shoulder. “I want to raise a glass to my big brother.”

“I’m your big brother, too,” Cam pointed out. “And so is Gray.”

“Then I’ll raise a glass to you all. It’s not often we get the chance to spend time together like this.”

“Especially without kids,” Gray pointed out. “And there’ll be another little Hartson very soon.”

Logan’s mouth felt dry at the thought. He would be a dad in five month’s time. Totally responsible for another life, when he didn’t even have his own sorted. Weird how that thought hit him like a bolt from the blue when he’d seen the baby on the ultrasound screen, ran his hand over Courtney’s soft bump. Gray had told him before how hard he’d found it to connect with the twins during Maddie’s pregnancy, at least until he could feel them move and kick and squirm against his hand. And then when they’d been born, he’d felt a love so fierce it had taken his breath away.

Would Logan be the same? He was pretty sure he would be. And the thought scared him because if he thought he was out of control at the moment, that feeling would be tenfold once he was a father.

He had a lot to think about. But for now, he was going to go inside the restaurant and spend time with his family. The ones he was born with – not the family he intended to make with the only woman who’d ever stolen his heart.

“Come on, I’ll buy you all a drink,” he muttered, inclining his head at the kitchen door.

Cam slapped him on the back. “Sounds good to me.”

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“TONIGHT WAS AMAZING,” Paris said when all the guests had gone and they’d finished shutting the restaurant down. It was almost two a.m. and Logan was beat. “I still can’t believe that you’re leaving this all behind.” She said as she pulled on her

coat and they walked to the door. “This is who you are, Logan. It’s what you excel at.” She waved her hand at the restaurant, her eyes intense. “Look at what we’ve achieved together.”

He turned his head to look. Chairs and tables. Empty plates and stacked cutlery. It sent no thrill through him at all. “I’m done with this,” he told her. “It’s over.”

“You’ll be back,” she told him. “Just as soon as the excitement with your farm girl has worn off. She can’t keep you happy, Logan. You and I both know that. You’re a man that likes to get things done. What will you do there, spend your life changing diapers? You’re better than that.”

“There’s nothing better than that,” he told her. And he knew it was true. He didn’t need a week to think about it. Everything he wanted was in Hartson’s Creek. The woman he loved, the baby he knew he would be crazy over.

His whole damn heart.

“You’ll regret it,” she told him. “You will. Nothing will ever feel as good as this does. We’re vampires, Logan. We feed off this high.”

He shook his head. “I used to be. Once. But now I realize how crazy that is. Working like a madman just to make a few more bucks. To get our name in the paper and all over the city. But that doesn’t keep you warm at night. It doesn’t fill your heart. Not like family and love and knowing there’s a little piece of you growing inside of the woman you love.”

She blinked, her mouth tight. “So you really are doing this, huh?”

Yeah, he was leaving this behind. And going to Hartson’s Creek. He was in love with Courtney Roberts. All he wanted to do was take care of her and their baby.

Now he just needed to find a way to persuade her that he meant it.



## CHAPTER THIRTY



Giving somebody space was much harder than it sounded once you realized you want to spend the rest of your life with them. Logan barely slept on Saturday night, and Sunday was a blur of breakfast with the family at his favorite Boston diner, followed by farewells as most of his family left for the airport to head home, while Cam was leaving with the team for a football game the following evening.

That left Logan alone in Boston, with his thoughts and the knowledge that he had five days to decide how to make this better. Every few minutes his fingers would reach for his phone, his resolve wavering as he thought about calling her.

He wanted to hear her voice. There was an ache in his heart that wouldn't go away, no matter how much he tried to ignore it. He knew that talking to her would soothe it. Make it all feel better.

But she'd asked for him to take some time and he was going to do that for her. For a little while, at least.

Walking toward the floor-to-ceiling windows that gave him a perfect view of Boston sprawling out beneath him, he leaned his head on the glass, his breath fogging it as he exhaled heavily. It was impossible to remember the last time he'd actually had time on his hands to think. Cam probably would tell him that was dangerous. The corner of his mouth lifted as he thought of his twin.

Cam had been right yesterday when he'd told Logan that he needed to let go of the outcome. But it was almost impossible not to wonder how to fix this thing between them. Standing here in an apartment he didn't want to live in, looking down at a city he didn't feel part of anymore, more than anything he wanted to fix it.

But first he needed to work on himself.

Needed to accept that he couldn't control everything the way he'd always tried to do. He wasn't perfect, his life wasn't perfect, and no amount of pushing himself to the extreme was going to make it that way.

Courtney and the baby though, were everything. And he felt blessed that they'd always have this connection between them. Even if she decided she didn't want to be with him, they'd both be with their child.

Yeah, thinking like that hurt like hell. He wanted to be with her, for Christ's sake. But he couldn't make her want to be with him, and he wouldn't want to. If they were going to be together, it had to be because they both wanted it.

She had a past. One that had pain and happiness in it. It was what made her who she was. This amazingly beautiful, clever, funny woman who ran into his life when he'd least expected it. She'd made everything seem more real, more focused. It was as though he'd been waiting for her all this time and hadn't realized it.

He pushed himself off the window, his hand leaving an outline on the glass. He'd agreed to give her space, but that didn't mean he had to sit around doing nothing. First of all, he'd go for a run. An easy one, because his knee would never be what it used to be. And then he'd sit down and make a list.

Not because he wanted to control the outcome, but because he had things he needed to do. A business to withdraw from. A house in his hometown to find. People he needed to get to know.

And a baby to prepare for.

That wasn't controlling anything. It was being a good father and co-parent.

She'd asked for space and he'd give it to her. But in five days he hoped like hell she'd give him some time for them to talk.

Maybe then the ache in his chest would start to fade away.

He grabbed his phone and quickly pulled up the contact he was looking for, swiping to connect the call. He lifted the phone to his ear, his heart in his mouth as he waited for her to answer.

"The *I Can Make You Beautiful* salon. Lainey speaking."

"Hey, Lainey. This is Logan. I need your advice on something."

---

IT WAS UNSEASONABLY warm for January. Courtney didn't need to wear a coat – thank goodness, because she still using her way-too-small for her bump jacket.

She needed to go shopping. Everything was too small for her now. Her belly felt round. Prominent. It made her wonder how huge she'd feel once she got to forty weeks.

She'd be exploding by then.

Pulling on an oversized cardigan, she slipped her feet into her boots and walked out to the chicken coop. Hester was the first to greet her, squawking loudly as Courtney opened the door. The hen walked out, her head proud, her eyes beady, shooting Courtney a disdainful look.

Shaking her head at Hester's antics, Courtney lifted her basket and walked inside, placing it in the center as she slowly filled it with eggs.

As she lifted the basket back up, there was a little kick to her stomach. Not from the hens, but from the inside, as the baby reminded her he or she was here. "Hey," Courtney murmured. "You finally woken up?" Another kick, followed

by a rumble in her stomach. “I guess we’re both hungry for breakfast, huh?”

Since she’d felt the first kick on Saturday, the movements had become more regular. Every time she felt a tiny nudge against her, it made her smile.

She’d finally be able to tell Logan about the kicking the following afternoon, at her twenty-week appointment.

It had been a long few days without him. In her heart she knew they needed this time. To think. To breathe, even. Everything between them had been a whirlwind, from the moment they met in the middle of the road as she ran after the hens, to their first kiss, their first touch, then the pregnancy test that changed everything.

She felt a little tap. This time not from inside her belly, but on her leg. She looked down to see Harriet standing there.

“I’m okay,” she told the hen. “I really am.”

She was in love with Logan Hartson. She’d known it for some time. It had dripped inside her, like rain seeping through a gap in the roof. Slow, at first, but then the weight of it had pushed down, caved the roof in, and filled her until she couldn’t ignore it any longer.

But it needed more than love for them to make this work. And much more than the intense attraction that drew them together whenever their eyes met. It needed communication and compromise. That was something they’d need to work on no matter what happened to the two of them. For their child’s sake they’d need to listen, to talk, to work things through. To be aware that they both weren’t going to get their own way every time.

“How are the birds?” Ellis called out, as he walked down the lane toward her. She hadn’t even heard his car. Courtney took the last of the eggs and walked out of the coop, her lips lifting into a smile.

“Same as always. Hester’s feeling aggrieved, Harriet’s looking for attention. The rest of them are falling in line behind them.”

Ellis lifted his eyebrows. “Good thing they have you to keep them under control. How are the new ones settling in?”

“They’ve started to lay,” Courtney told him, lifting up the basket. “There’s plenty for the restaurant, and then some. I’m thinking an omelet tonight sounds good.”

“Talking of food, I have something for you.” Ellis lifted his arms. She hadn’t noticed he was carrying a white cardboard box. The kind you got at a bakery. “Mary asked me to bring them over. There are too many for her. She thought you might like them.”

“What are they?”

“Cookies and cakes,” Ellis said, shaking his head as though it was a stupid question. “Your man Logan sent them over to us. He sent some to Carl, too, by the sounds of it. Though Carl didn’t sound too happy.”

Carl had been released from the hospital the day after the shooting, heading straight home to recuperate. Mary had slept in his apartment the first night, but after that he’d refused any help. Courtney had called him to check on how he was feeling, but they’d both been cold with each other.

She was okay with that. He’d always be family in one way or another, but nothing more. Either he accepted things or he didn’t.

“Logan sent you pastries?” She pulled her lip between her teeth, her eyes meeting Ellis’s.

“Yeah. The good ones, too. You want some?”

The last time they talked he hadn’t even met Ellis and Mary. And now they were on pastry terms? What had he been doing all week?

Courtney’s stomach grumbled again. “Yeah, I could eat one. Let me put these eggs in their trays and wash my hands. You want a drink and have one with me?”

“Just had one. I’m heading to the upper field to repair the fence up there.” He inclined his head. “That Logan, I think he’ll be okay.”

“You do?” Courtney blinked, trying to hide her surprise. “You’ve spoken to him?” She felt a desperate need to know more.

“Yeah. He called Mary last night to introduce himself and make sure she was okay. Apparently your friend Lainey gave him our number. Anyway, he is a good man. Told her to take care, that your baby needs all its grandparents safe and sound.” He nodded, looking away. “That made her smile, you know?”

Unexpected tears stung at Courtney’s eyes. “I didn’t know.”

“Yeah, well, if he makes Mary smile, then he’s okay with me.” He followed Courtney to the house, carrying the box into the kitchen. “I know it hasn’t been easy for you. None of this. But I appreciate all you do for us. Mary does, too. Since we lost Shaun it’s been tough on the farm.” He cleared his throat. “We couldn’t have done this without you.”

“I love the farm.” Courtney met his gaze. “You know that.”

“I do. But eventually we’ll need to think about selling. Me and Mary aren’t getting any younger, and farming isn’t an old man’s job.”

“You don’t need to sell. I can help.”

He gave her the softest of smiles. “I know you can. But you have your baby to think about. A family of your own.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but her words dissolved on her tongue. He was right. She had a future to think about.

“Right,” Ellis said, clapping his hands together. “I’d best get off. I’ll catch you when you’re back from the restaurant.”

She nodded. “Sure.” But she was still busy thinking about Logan. The way he treated Mary and Ellis had touched her heart.

Maybe it wasn’t frozen solid after all.

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***THANK you for being so kind to Mary and Ellis. I appreciate it.***

Logan stared at the message, his mouth dry. It was the first thing he'd heard from Courtney all week. It was crazy, but his hand was shaking as he held his phone and read the words over and over again.

Taking a deep breath, he tapped out a reply.

***It's a pleasure. Are you okay? The baby doing fine?***

It only took a minute for her to reply, but it felt like hours.

***We're good. Maybe we can talk tomorrow? Are we meeting at the doctor's office for the scan?***

The ghost of a smile passed his lips as he lifted his head and looked around Gray and Maddie's kitchen. The four of them were out – Gray at a meeting somewhere, and Maddie and the twins were at some kind of mom and toddler class. He'd have to ask her about it. Maybe it was something he and the baby could do some time, assuming dads were also allowed.

He'd flown in a few hours earlier, unable to stay away any longer, and had dropped his bags at Gray's house – at Maddie's insistence. He'd just grabbed himself a coffee and sat down to decide what to say to Courtney when his phone had beeped.

***I flew in earlier. I'm at Gray's place. Maybe I can come over now if that works?***

Was that too much? Not enough? Would she think he was being too forward.

He sighed at his own overthinking. *Let go of the outcome, bro.*

***Yes please.***

He'd barely read her response before he was in his rental and driving through the large iron gates that led out to the road. The farm was only a ten minute drive away, and it killed him, but he kept to the speed limit. Even if every second away from her was too long.

She was outside when he pulled up at the cottage, her dark curls tied back, wearing a pair of denim overalls and a black, long-sleeved top. Even from the car he could see the curve of her stomach, and it made his heart clench. He was going to have to get close to her without touching, and it was going to kill him.

As he climbed out of the car, she looked up from the porch. She touched the soft swell of her bump, and it sent a shot of warmth through him. How long had it been since they'd seen each other? Weeks? It felt like years.

“Hey.” His lips lifted as he walked toward her. She smiled in response.

“Hey. How long have you been here?”

“I flew in this morning.” He lifted an eyebrow. “I guess I couldn't stay away anymore.”

She opened her mouth to say something, then closed it again.

“Can I come up?” he asked, glancing at the steps. She nodded and he climbed the three risers, his muscles tensing as he stopped a few feet from where she was standing.

God, she was beautiful. Her eyes lifted to meet his, and for a moment he was breathless. He wanted to walk forward, wrap his arms around her, and carry her into the cottage and right to bed.

To feel her soft lips as he kissed her. To hear her soft sighs as he touched her in all the places he knew drove her crazy. To bury himself inside her until neither of them could breathe.

“Logan?”

He blinked. “Sorry. I was somewhere else for a minute.”

Her eyes crinkled as though she knew exactly where he'd been. “I was asking if you'd like a drink.”

“I'm good. I just had coffee.”

“No worries.” She smiled again. “Should we sit down?”



He was about to agree when she froze in front of him. Then she touched her stomach.

“Court? Are you okay?”

Her face lifted, her eyes meeting his. “It’s the baby,” she told him, her voice a whisper. “He or she just kicked me.”

It was his turn to freeze. Amazement washed over him, warm and sweet. “You can feel the baby moving?”

She nodded.

“Can I feel?” He couldn’t help but grin.

“I don’t think you’ll be able to feel it yet. But you can try.” She walked toward him, taking his hand with her own and placing it on her stomach. His brows dipped with concentration as his palm pressed against the denim covering her stomach, his fingers splaying out. “There,” she breathed. “Did you feel it?”

He shook his head. “Not yet. Maybe I need to get you naked.”

She laughed. “Nice try.”

He looked up from her stomach. “Court, I’m so damn sorry for asking you to stop seeing your family. I was being a jealous asshole. I never should have said the things I did.” He blew out a mouthful of air. “I’ve done nothing but think about everything you said since I hung up the phone on Saturday. And I need you to know something. I’m all in here. With you, with the baby. If you’ll have me.”

“Are you sure?” she asked. “You’re giving up a lot.”

“But I’m gaining so much more.” He couldn’t help but stroke his hand against her stomach. Just that simple connection grounded him. “I know that Mary and Ellis are important to you. Carl, too. Even if he is a dick sometimes.”

“Say what you really think.” Her eyes were warm. “And yeah, they’re important. But you and the baby, you’re the most important things in my life. I should have told you that on the phone.”

His chest felt tighter than ever. The pain he'd been feeling all week was joined by another, stronger emotion.

*Hope.*

"There's room in your heart for all of us. I get that now," he told her.

She nodded. "Love isn't limited. Nor are hearts. They keep growing as more people are taken inside." She took his hand, moving it up until it was pressed against her chest. "You feel this?" she asked him, as her heart beat strongly against his palm.

"Yeah, I feel it."

"It's yours," she whispered. "You stole it months ago."

Christ, he was going to cry. He blinked back the tears, letting out a ragged breath. "I don't want to control you," he told her. "I don't want to tell you how to live or who to be with. I just want to be part of your life, however you'll have me."

Her own eyes were watering. She nodded.

"Whatever you decide, I'm still moving back here," he told her. "We've already got a couple of people interested in investing in the restaurants. I'll still have part ownership, but I'll be a sleeping partner. I want to be here for the baby. And for you. But if you want us to only be co-parents, that's okay, too." It would kill him, but he'd do it.

"You'd still leave Boston?"

He nodded. "Yeah. I'm going to look at some houses this week. I'd like you to come with me if you can. Just for an opinion. Even if you don't want to live with me, the baby will be spending lots of time there. I figure you should get a say in it, too."

"Who says I don't want to live with you?"

Another pulse of hope. "I don't want to presume..."

She took his hand once more, this time lifting it to her lips. She kissed the center of his palm, then laid it against her

cheek. “I love you,” she told him. “You’re my future. And I want it to start right now.”

He ran the pad of his thumb along her jaw then slid it up to trace the outline of her plump lips. She stared up at him, their gazes clashing in a way that sent desire right down to his groin.

“Will it always be like this?” Courtney said, her voice low. “Will I always want to tear your clothes off whenever you’re close?”

He smiled at her words. “God, I hope so.” He stepped closer, sliding his hand around to the small of her back. “Because that’s exactly the way I feel. Every time I look at you I want you.”

“Show me,” she whispered.

A loud squawk came from the chicken coop. “Quick,” Courtney whispered urgently. “Before Hester notices you’re here.”

He dropped his brow until it was pressed against hers. “Has she missed me?”

“Like crazy. As in really crazy.” Her eyes sparkled.

He would have asked more, but he was too busy scooping his hands beneath her denim clad behind.

“Are you sure you want to do that?” she asked. “I’m heavier than ever.”

“I’m sure.” He told her, lifting her into his arms. “And you look perfect.”

By the time they’d made it inside, Courtney had already unfastened three of his buttons. He kicked the front door closed and turned around, pressing her against the wall to steady her. Then he kissed her, hard and firm, his lips warm against hers as he showed her exactly how much he wanted her.

She was his future, and he was hers. And the beautiful thing was, he had no idea what their future looked like.

But he knew he wanted it.

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COURTNEY LOOKED UP AT LOGAN, taking in his desire-filled eyes, open white shirt, and the expensive silver watch on his wrist. He'd barely touched her and she was writhing on the bed, needy as hell for him. She had a feeling that it was always going to be like this.

They'd sneak kisses where they could, when the children weren't looking. Exchange hot glances during the baby's bath time, counting down the hours until they'd be in bed again. It would be exhilarating, crazy-making, and everything she knew she wanted.

He completed her in every way.

Standing at the end of the bed, he shucked off his shirt, his eyes still trained on her as he unfastened his watch. He was only in dress pants, and she swallowed hard as her gaze dipped to his muscled chest, his ridged abdomen, then down further still.

He'd already taken her clothes off, kissing her neck, her shoulders, her chest as he removed every piece. Then he'd told her to lay on the bed and wait, his voice so sure it sent tingles to every nerve ending in her body.

In the bedroom he was bossy. Everywhere else? They were a team.

Just the way she liked it.

"Open your legs," he said, and she did exactly as she was told. He stepped out of his pants, wearing only his shorts now, and climbed in between, running his hands along her calves, her thighs, then up to her swollen stomach.

"I love this," he said pressing his lips against her belly. "You're gonna have to eat a lot when the baby comes so I can keep this belly."

Amusement mingled with her desire. “You can’t keep this belly. I’m not walking around looking like I’m five months pregnant just for your... oh.” He closed his mouth around a nipple, making her back arch with pleasure. “What was I saying?”

He smiled against her breast. “I think you were saying you’d do whatever I wanted,” he said softly, sucking at her again.

“Did I?”

He stroked her stomach softly, moving his palm down until he was right where she needed him, the heel of his hand pressing against her. “I guess the other option is to keep knocking you up.” He lifted his head, his eyes teasing. “It’ll be a tough job...”

“Birth control.” She gasped as he dragged a finger against her. “We need to take all the birth control after this baby is born. You’re too potent for your own good.”

He brushed his lips against hers, his finger circling her in a rhythm that stole her breath away. “Yeah, but we don’t need to use it right now.”

No, they didn’t. And she was really glad about that, because he was driving her crazy with only his touch. She reached her hand down, her palm brushing against him in a way that made him hiss loudly. “Yeah,” he murmured against her mouth. “That’s good.”

She couldn’t get enough of him. That’s what four days of not talking did to her. She wasn’t sure she’d survive that again. She pulled his shorts down, smiling, because she knew she didn’t have to.

Yeah, he still had Boston to sort out, and that would take time. Plus they were going to have a baby, and everybody knew how much strain that could put on people. But he was hers, the same way she was his. She had been since the moment their eyes connected on the road, right as Hester flew toward him, feathers everywhere.

He slid against her, large and thick and oh so hard, making her hips roll until he was almost inside her. He kissed her throat, her chest, then brushed his lips against her nipple. “You ready, baby?” he asked, glancing up at her through his lashes.

Yeah, she was ready. For him, for their life, for everything they were going to face. Together.

And as he slid inside her, she knew it was the start of something wonderful.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



### *F*OUR MONTHS LATER

MAY HAD ALWAYS BEEN one of Courtney's favorite months. The weather was warm, the crops were growing, and the fields were full of baby animals following their mothers around like, well, sheep. It was hard work – farming always was – but it was rewarding to see all their plans coming to fruition.

Her work this year had been different than normal. For a start, they had an extra pair of hands in Ben, the local college student who came to work every other day, taking over the hard labor tasks that Courtney could no longer manage at thirty-four weeks pregnant. Technically, they had two extra pair of hands, if you counted Logan, who'd taken to helping Ellis out on the land whenever he had a chance.

She glanced across the lawn at where he was standing with his brothers, the four of them laughing and raising bottles to each other. She'd gotten close to them all. Gray and his soft strumming of the guitar whenever they all got together. Tanner and his grin and penchant for practical jokes. And especially Cam, who looked so much like Logan, yet was completely different in temperament. Though they both had a competitive streak that made her secretly smile.

"This place is beautiful," Becca said as she walked over, holding a glass of champagne in her hand.

They'd decided to hold the baby shower in the gardens of *The Secret Gourmet*. It was the perfect location. The cherry trees were blossoming, and birds were chirping in the branches. It felt like the beginning of something new.

"Here," Becca said, passing Courtney an orange juice as she kept hold of her champagne flute. "I thought you could do with a drink."

Courtney smiled at Logan's sister. She was growing fond of her, too. Becca was younger than the brothers, but somehow balanced them out. And she loved the way they all protected her like mother hens. She took the orange juice from Becca's outstretched hand. "Thanks, I was about to grab one. The way the baby keeps kicking I'm going to need all the energy I can get."

"He's kicking again?" Becca asked, her eyes lit up. They'd found out the sex at her twenty-week appointment. Logan had been proud as hell, and his brothers had made jokes about more heartbreakers in the family. Becca had shaken her head, and pointed out that whenever one of them actually had a girl, she was going to make sure she gave them hell.

"Want to feel?" Courtney asked. Becca nodded eagerly, and Courtney took her hand, placing it against the side of her stomach where the baby loved to push his feet.

Becca's eyes widened as she felt the movement. "Oh no, he's gonna be another football player, isn't he?"

"What's wrong with that?" Logan asked, walking over to them and kissing Becca's cheek. "It's in the genes." He slid his hand around Courtney's ever-expanding stomach and brushed his lips against hers. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "I'm good."

"Shall we open some gifts?" He nodded at the table in the center of the lawn, overflowing with beautifully wrapped presents. She'd asked people not to spend too much, but of course all of their friends and family had gone overboard. And yeah, she secretly loved them for it.



It had been her idea to have a baby shower where all the men in their lives as well as the women were invited. She hated the idea of games and measuring her stomach and all the other horror stories she'd read about on pregnancy forums. So much nicer to be here on the lawn of Ellie and Dan's home-based restaurant, with the food and drink they'd sat down and ordered a few weeks ago. Since Logan had moved back to Hartson's Creek for good last month, they'd spent a lot of time with his friends. He'd helped out with their menus, and talked business plans with Dan. Their exclusive dining experience was in demand, and they were booked out every weekend for months to come. But neither Dan or Ellie wanted to expand – they liked their life and home exactly the way it was.

Which had, of course, set Logan's mind thinking. And Courtney knew that was a beautiful and dangerous thing.

Within a week, he'd laid out a plan to her. If Ellis and Mary were still planning to sell the farm in the next couple of years, he wanted to buy it.

“Think about it,” he'd whispered, stroking her stomach as he sat next to her on their porch. “You could run the farm and we could redevelop the cottage into a restaurant. We'd have the food production covered from field to plate. We can grow the produce we'll need for the restaurant, and buy what we can't grow. Maybe we'd even have tours, educate people on where the food they're eating actually comes from.”

And just like that, his enthusiasm had lit a spark inside of her. They both knew they'd need a lot of help, something Logan had already factored into the figures he'd calculated. But knowing how popular Ellie and Dan's restaurant was, it was obvious it could work.

They'd talked to Mary and Ellis the next day. They'd been bowled over by the idea of Logan and Courtney buying the farm. “I always hoped we could pass it on to family,” Mary had confessed, her eyes watering. “And now we will.”

They'd all agreed to wait until the baby arrived before taking the next step. It was only a few weeks away, after all. And in the meantime, Ellis was happily accepting Logan's

help on the farm, while educating him on all aspects of crop and animal management.

Logan took Courtney's hand, leading her over to the center table. "Everybody!" he called out. "We're going to open some gifts. But first, I want to say a few words."

Tanner groaned. "We don't have a spare three hours."

"Shut up." Logan mock-glared at him. "I'm talking."

"As usual," Cam muttered with a grin.

Courtney shook her head at their banter, and looked at the crowd gathering around them. Mary and Ellis were next to Logan's Aunt Gina and his father, the four of them chatting like old friends. Lainey and a few of the girls from the salon were laughing and drinking from champagne glasses, along with Maddie and Van. Carl hadn't made it – though they'd invited him. And Courtney's dad and stepmom had sent a beautiful bunch of flowers and a note asking to visit once the baby arrived.

"Okay," Logan called out, sliding his arm around Courtney's waist. He was such a natural at public speaking. "First of all, we'd like to give you all a big thanks for joining us today, and celebrating the impending arrival of our baby." He looked at the table overflowing with gifts. "And thank you all for bringing these, even though we told you not to."

Their friends laughed. Courtney smiled, because he was so warm, so engaging. Everybody looked at him whenever he spoke.

"As you all know, this place belongs to my friends, Dan and Ellie." He gave them a nod as they walked around with canapés. "They're amazing chefs and hosts, and we couldn't have done this without them."

"Cheers," Courtney said, holding her orange juice up to them.

"Finally, I want to say thank you to this beautiful, amazing woman standing next to me." Logan turned his gaze onto her, and she felt it again. That longing, that need. Courtney swallowed hard, trying to chase it away.

Now wasn't the time or the place.

"I can't tell you how much I love her," he said, a grin pulling at his lips. "But I'm going to try. She's the most amazing farmer, business owner, and friend you'll ever want to meet."

"Hell yeah!" Lainey shouted out.

"But she's also the best partner. She doesn't take my crap unless I ask her really nicely." He winked and Courtney blushed, knowing exactly what he was referring to. "And every day I wake up wondering what the hell I did right to find her. Because she's everything to me, and I can't wait for our baby to arrive so the world has another piece of Courtney in it." He reached out to caress her stomach. "Though I'm gonna miss this belly."

"Shut up." She shook her head at him, biting down a grin.

"Anyway. Please raise your glass to my beautiful girlfriend, and our baby to be." He lifted his own glass – orange juice, just like Courtney's. "Cheers."

"Cheers!" the crowd repeated.

"Okay. Let's open some gifts." He smiled at Courtney. "You wanna open the first one?"

She shrugged. "Okay."

He lifted a small box from the top of the pile, passing it to her. Courtney unfastened the blue ribbon, then pulled at the silver paper. There was a cardboard box inside, and she pulled it open, expecting to see a pacifier in there.

But instead there was a pale blue jewelery box. Maybe it was a little silver fairy box – she'd seen those online. Something to store the baby's first tooth in.

But instead, when she opened it, there was a ring nestled into the velvet cushion, square-cut diamonds sparkling as she pulled it out. She turned to look at Logan, confusion pulling at her brow.

"That one's from me," he told her, his expression serious. "If you'll have it."

“Is it a...”

“I want us to get married,” he told her, lifting the ring from the box. “Whenever you’re ready. But if you don’t want to, the ring is still yours. It’s a sign of how much I love you. How much I want you to be mine. How I’ll take you any way I can get you, because you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

Her eyes stung as she looked up at him, her breath catching in her throat. “I want to get married,” she said, her voice sure. “So much.”

His smile was dazzling as he slid the ring onto her finger. “Thank you,” he told her, leaning his head down to kiss her again, murmuring against her lips. “I can’t wait for you to be my wife.”

She kissed him back, her arms looping around his neck, the diamonds glinting in the sunlight.

“Let’s do it soon,” she whispered. “Once the baby’s here.”

“Deal.” He slid his hand down her side, pulling her against him, her stomach pressed against his. “Thank you for making me so happy.”

The baby kicked against the center of her stomach, as if in protest at being squashed. Logan’s eyes widened with surprise as he looked down. “Damn. Strong right kick, just like his dad.”

She had a feeling the little guy inside of her was going to be just like his dad in every way. The thought made her heart so full it could burst.

“I’ll kiss it better later,” she whispered, not wanting anybody else to hear.

He laughed this time, the skin at the corner of his eyes crinkling up. Taking her hand, he lifted it to his lips, kissing her palm, her fingers, the ring he’d just slid onto her.

“Sounds good,” he whispered back, his eyes full of humor. “I’m going to hold you to that.”

## EPILOGUE



Pouring a glass of cool lemonade, Courtney cradled her son against her chest with her right arm, picking the full glass up with her left and carrying them both out to the porch. The evening air always smelled sweet at this time of year. Corn dust wafted in from the fields, heralding the start of harvest time.

Not that she needed reminding. Her whole body ached from working eight hours on the farm today. Mary had watched George for them, her smile wide when Courtney had walked through the door that morning, gently taking him from her arms as Courtney and Ellis made their way out to the fields.

It was still hard to be away from her child, no matter how many times she went back to hug him or feed him during the day. But now it was the two of them, sitting on the porch of their new home, overlooking the full waters of Hartson's Creek as they made their way toward the river.

They'd moved in here right before George was born, and had spent those final few weeks of her pregnancy decorating his nursery. All of Logan's family had come to help – Becca turned out to be a maestro with the paintbrush, Gray and Tanner were pretty nifty with a screwdriver when it came to building all the nursery furniture, and Logan would tidy up everything each evening, making sure that Courtney didn't lift a finger.

"You've got enough to do," he'd murmured when she protested that she wanted to help. "You're growing our baby."

And now that baby was in her arms, staring up at her with wide blue eyes. George Cameron Robert Hartson had been almost two weeks late. Born on July 4<sup>th</sup> of all days. According to Logan, the waiting room had been like a party full of their families, the Hartsons and the Roberts, as well as Lainey who'd turned out to be a rock when Courtney needed her.

But the only two people who'd mattered to her that day were Logan and George. Though the birth had been hard, she'd expected that. What she hadn't expected was the rush of bliss that came over her as soon as George was delivered. And the expression of sheer wonder on Logan's face. As the two of them had sat and cradled their son, counting his fingers and toes, while remarking on who he looked like most, she'd felt this overwhelming sense of completion. As though that was where she was supposed to be.

That all the twists and turns in her life had led up to this.

In the two months since they'd brought George home from the hospital, those emotions hadn't left her. Not through the pain of breastfeeding and mastitis, and not even when Logan had to fly back to Boston to complete the sale of his company to the new investor, and she had to face a sleepless night with George alone.

But Logan always made it up to her. The last time he'd insisted she have an evening out with Lainey, followed by a bubble bath when she returned home, then he handled baby duty for the whole night. When he wasn't working – either overseeing the construction of their new restaurant on the site where Courtney's cottage used to be, or helping her and Ellis in the fields as they worked from early morning until dusk bringing in the harvest – he was constantly with George, his eyes soft, his strong arms cradling their son as though protecting him from all the world.

It made her heart ache to see him whisper to their son. Tell him about all the hopes and dreams he had for him. If Logan as a restaurateur was sexy, Logan as a father made her want to explode. It was a good thing her ovaries were taking a rest right now while she breastfed.

George let out a cry, his lips smacking as he looked up at her with his big blue eyes.

“You hungry again?” she asked him, as he wriggled in her hold. She unclipped her nursing bra and lifted him to her breast, holding his head gently as he easily latched on. His eyes closed, as his lips moved rhythmically.

The rumbling growl of an engine cut through the quiet of the September evening. She looked over, seeing dust kick up from the road as a black SUV turned into their driveway. She bit down a grin at the sight of Logan’s car. It was the safest vehicle he could find, according to the salesman, who’d raved about the roll cage and bullet proof windows.

She’d laughed, asking him who the hell needed bullet proof windows in Hartson’s Creek.

“They’ll protect me from Hester,” Logan had told her when he took her on a tour of the car. “I figure bullet proof means beak proof, too.”

George’s eyes fluttered open as the door of the SUV opened, and Logan climbed out. She stroked his soft head.

Damn, Logan could still take her breath away. He was wearing one of his suits – a rare occurrence nowadays, when his uniform was usually jeans and a t-shirt. His tie was gone – no doubt rolled up in his pocket – and his white shirt unbuttoned at his throat. His pants were perfectly tailored, smooth against his taut stomach, and over his slim hips.

He took his sunglasses off, his gaze soft as he smiled at her and George. That sense of completeness washed over her again. He was home.

“How was your day?” she asked, as he walked up the steps to the porch. He sat down on the swing next to her, kissing her cheek and touching George’s head.

“Long. Boring. And I missed you two. How was yours?”

She smiled. “Pretty much the same. Did you get everything done you needed to?”

“Yes. All signed.” He’d left for Boston early that morning, telling her he couldn’t do an overnight stay again. He missed her and George too much. “The money’s been transferred, which means we can officially buy the farm tomorrow.”

Mary and Ellis would stay in the farmhouse until the harvest was over and the quiet season had begun. Then they were moving into their new home in Maple Cross, and Courtney and Logan would begin to update the large home. They hadn’t decided if they’d move in yet, or rent it out, but either way it would be a good investment.

They’d even talked about turning it into a bed and breakfast. Logan saw so many opportunities in the land, and it made her excited. Their future was looking bright.

“Did you manage to see Cam?”

“For about five minutes. He had to head to the stadium for the game.”

“How are his headaches?” Courtney asked, her brows dipping. She knew Logan was worried about his twin. Though he was still suffering from headaches, both Cam and his doctor insisted he was fit to start the new football season. Logan worried about him a lot – Courtney knew that. And that made her worry about them both.

“He says they’re fine. He got the all clear to play tonight.” Logan shrugged.

“Hopefully the doctors know best.” She gave him a small smile.

“Yeah, I hope so.”

George shuffled in her arms, his head lolling back as his lips curled into a milk-drunk smile. “I’ll take him,” Logan said, lifting George from her arms.

“You’ll need this,” Courtney said, passing him the burp cloth she used to wipe up George’s mouth. “Maybe take off your jacket. He’ll ruin it if he spits up.”

“I don’t think I’ll be needing this again,” Logan said, though he took the jacket off anyway. He slung the cloth over



his shoulder, then gently held George's head against it, rubbing his back until their baby let out an impressive burp.

"That's my boy," Logan murmured. "Does he need a bath?"

"Just did it."

"Then I'll take him to bed. You stay there. I'll put dinner on and bring you out a drink."

Courtney smiled at him. "That sounds good."

He winked at her, and damn if it didn't make her skin heat up, sending her heart into a crazy spin. Maybe when George was in bed tonight, she'd show him just how much she'd missed him today. It might have only been half a day since he'd pressed his lips against her brow and told her he'd see her that evening, but every moment without him felt like days.

"Logan?" she called out, as he turned to walk into the house, George snuggling against his chest.

"Yeah?"

"Keep the shirt and pants on. I have plans."

He lifted an eyebrow, his eyes dancing as he looked at her. "What kind of plans?"

"The sort that I can't tell you about in front of our son."

He laughed. "I like the sound of those plans."

Yeah, and so did she. Very much. "Then let's eat quickly," she suggested. "I don't know about you, but I'm ready to go to bed."

---

HE COULD NEVER GET ENOUGH of her. As she lay in his arms, her soft curls brushing his biceps as her face rested against his chest, he felt as though life couldn't get any better than this. He could remember her asking him if the need they felt for each other would ever go away. And the answer was no. He knew that for a fact.

He'd loved her like crazy before George was born. But seeing her as a mother deepened that love, made it feel almost spiritual. Everything she did was sexy. From the way she could lift a bale of hay with those slim, tan arms, to the way she fed their son with her body.

She blinked open an eye, smiling as she caught him staring at her. "Hi," she said. "Did I fall asleep?"

"Only for ten minutes. You looked like you needed it."

She pressed her lips to his bare chest. "That's because you wore me out."

They'd barely finished eating the pasta marinara he'd cooked before she'd straddled him on the chair, running her hands up the smooth cotton of his shirt. He'd been hard as soon as she'd looked at him over her fork, her eyes dark with desire, her lips parted. And when she'd touched him, the need inside them both had exploded.

They'd headed to the bedroom, stripping their clothes off as they ran, both knowing their alone time was limited nowadays.

"You're the one who did the wearing out," he murmured, tracing circles along her back with his finger. "Especially when you made me do the thing."

"You love the thing." The corner of her lip lifted. "You know you do."

Yeah, he *loved* the thing. The one that made her gasp and shiver and then come apart all over him. He loved everything they did together.

A loud cry drowned out their heavy breathing. Courtney lifted her head. "That's my cue to get out of here," she said, grinning at him. "Wham, bam, thank you, Logan."

"You're welcome. I'm available for weddings, christenings, and bar mitzvahs."

She grabbed her robe and wrapped it around, fastening it with the belt. "Speaking of weddings, Ellie and Dan have penciled us in for the last weekend in November. They say we

can fit thirty people at a push in the house, or we can arrange for a tent. I said we'd come over to discuss."

"Let's do the tent. I want everybody to be there." Wanted everybody to see her officially become his wife. Not that it would make much difference – he already felt like her husband. But if he was being honest – and admittedly being a caveman – he wanted her to have his surname the same way George did.

It felt like it was the final step in their new life together.

"Sure. Sounds good. And Reverend Maitland wants us to come and see him to discuss the ceremony."

"Great," Logan said that with less enthusiasm. But if you wanted to have a wedding, you had to have the ceremony. If they didn't ask Reverend Maitland to do it, he'd be upset.

George cried out again. As Courtney went to calm him in the nursery, Logan pulled on his jeans and went to the kitchen to tidy up from dinner. Switching the television on to catch the end of Cam's football game, he began to pile up the dirty dishes and load them into the dishwasher.

"It's not looking good," the commentator said. "They're carrying him off on a stretcher."

Logan glanced up from where he was squatting in front of the dishwasher, his brows pulled together as he glanced at the screen. And then his muscles froze, because he knew exactly who was on that stretcher, wearing the Boston Bobcats uniform.

It was like watching himself be carried off the field. He slowly stood, his fingers clutching the counter as he stared at the television.

"Is that the game?" Courtney asked, walking into the kitchen. "Are they winning?"

Logan said nothing. She frowned, looking from him to the television, her eyes widening as she saw the stretcher.

"Is that?"

"Yeah." His voice was gritty. "It's him."

“What happened?” she asked, her voice a whisper. She slid her arms around Logan, her embrace comforting even though his heart was pounding.

“I don’t know.” He shook his head. “I just turned it on.”

Gently cradling his jaw in her hands, she pressed her lips to his cheek. “It’s okay,” she told him. “Cam’s moving. See?”

Sure enough, he could see Cam’s arms waving in front of him, like he was saying something to the medics. They stopped, and he climbed off of the stretcher, shaking his head at them like he was pissed as hell. There was no sign of injury, no broken limbs, no blood pouring from a wound. There was only the precautionary neck brace, that Logan knew Cam already wanted off.

One of the trainers came up to him and pointed at the stretcher. Cam shook his head and put his hands on his hips, still looking irritated.

Logan couldn’t help but laugh with relief. “Damn, he’s giving them hell.”

“He always does.” Courtney kissed him again, deeper this time, and he felt the need for her pulse through him. “He’s just like his twin brother.”

His lips curled against hers. “I don’t know whether that’s criticism or a compliment.”

“Both.”

They laughed.

“I’ll call him in a little bit,” Logan said, when they finally parted. “Hopefully he’ll be answering his phone by then.”

“You sure you’re okay?” she asked.

“Yeah.” He nodded, pulling her back into his arms, because he could never get enough of her. Everything would always be okay because she was here. And with Courtney by his side, he could deal with anything.

His brother being pissed about being carried off was one of them. They’d both call him and rib him out, then they’d go to

bed and curl up with each other until George woke sometime in the overnight hours.

Life really didn't get much better than that.

"Good. Because I love you, Mr. Hartson," Courtney murmured, resting her head on his shoulder.

Joy exploded inside him. "I love you, too," he said, brushing his lips against her cheek. "So much I don't know what to do with it."

She looked up at him. "I have an idea what you can do with it," she said, her eyes twinkling.

"Again?" he asked.

"After you've made that phone call." She nodded.

He kissed her hard and hot, then pulled away. "It's a deal. Hold that thought."

**Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed Logan and Courtney's story. The next book in the *Heartbreak Brothers* series is **SOMEBODY LIKE YOU**. Find out what happens when Cam returns to Hartson's Creek following a football injury, and falls for a beautiful single mom with two tearaway sons.**

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DEAR READER

Thank you so much for reading Logan and Courtney's story. If you enjoyed it and you get a chance, I'd be so grateful if you can leave a review. And don't forget to keep an eye out for **SOMEBODY LIKE YOU**, the fourth book in the series, coming out in March 2021.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carrie Elks writes contemporary romance with a sizzling edge. Her first book, *Fix You*, has been translated into eight languages and made a surprise appearance on *Big Brother* in Brazil. Luckily for her, it wasn't voted out.

Carrie lives with her husband, two lovely children and a larger-than-life black pug called Plato. When she isn't writing or reading, she can be found baking, drinking an occasional (!) glass of wine, or chatting on social media.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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